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Lesbian and Bisexual Girls in the Juvenile Justice System

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the experiences of lesbian and bisexual girls in the juvenile justice system. Its purpose is to document how the juvenile justice system serves this population. The researcher interviewed six lesbian or bisexual youth and six staff participants who work with them and found that the system is lacking in its awareness and treatment of this population. Some problems include homophobia and heterosexism in policy, staff attitudes, and by other girls, disparate treatment of lesbian and bisexual girls motivated by stereotypes and misinformation, and little understanding of the role that sexual orientation may play in a girl's life. Implications for future practice and policy are offered.

KEY WORDS: Lesbian; Bisexual; Adolescent; Juvenile Justice.

Introduction

The literature on gay and lesbian youth has focused on the stressors in their lives and their experience in our different systems of care: school, mental health, health care, and child welfare. However, the literature is largely silent on the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in the juvenile justice system. Therefore, this researcher undertook a study of lesbian and bisexual girls in the juvenile justice system, in which the following central research questions were posed: 1) What were their experiences in this system as lesbian and bisexual girls? 2) How did other girls, staff and administrators treat them? 3) What policies affected them as lesbian and bisexual girls?

The existing literature suggests that lesbian, bisexual, and questioning girls may be both over-represented and underserved in the juvenile justice system (Dang, 1997; Savin-Williams, 1994; Schaffner, 1998). This population also receives homophobic and heterosexist treatment in the juvenile justice system, such as being subjected to

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different rules or even being criminalized for consensual same-sex sexual experiences (Abinati, 1994; Curtin, 1999; Dang, 1997). By sharing the voices of these girls, this article seeks to document for social workers and others working in the juvenile justice system the current treatment experienced by lesbian and bisexual girls in this system. The disparate treatment of lesbian and bisexual girls in this system is explored. The related literature is reviewed, and the methodology is explained. Finally, findings and implications for methods, policy and clinical practice are discussed.

Review of the Literature

Historically, there is a paucity of theory and research on lesbian, gay and bisexual youth (Due, 1995; Lock & Steiner, 1999; Ruskola, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1994). What research exists often is faulty, problem saturated, male oriented and biased (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Her-ness, 1998; Malinsky, 1997; Mallon, 1998; Morales, 1990b). This void is particularly consequential because lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are disproportionately at risk for self-injurious behavior, mental health problems, and violence from others (Ruskola, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1994). The little that is known about the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in the juvenile justice system is disturbing (Abinati, 1994; Curtin, 1999; Ruskola, 1996). No studies have been carried out, and only a few articles discuss the specific legal problems faced by these youth (Sullivan, C., 1996).

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adolescents

Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth experience added stressors and developmental tasks unique to their sexual orientation (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). These include adjusting to the socially stigmatized role of being lesbian, gay or bisexual; negotiating society's homophobia and heterosexism; and managing their own internalized homophobia (Gonsiorek, 1988; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1994). Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth of color may have even more difficulty due to racial or ethnic discrimination (Morales, 1990a, 1990b; Savin-Williams, 1996). Heterosexism and homophobia and the engendered invisibility and isolation are believed to effect the social development, self-esteem and mental health of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth (Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Nichols, 1999; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). Many receive relatively little support from family and friends who do not share their identity (Hetrick & Martin, 1987).

Not surprisingly, this population has higher rates of certain psychological and social problems than does the general adolescent population (Gibson, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1984). These youth suffer higher rates of suicide, substance abuse, school problems, health problems and homelessness (Gibson, 1989; Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997; Kruks, 1991; Remafadi, 1987a, 1987b; Rosario, Hunter & Gwadz, 1997). They also experience a high rate of verbal and physical abuse, much of which is perpetrated by family members (Hunter, 1990; Hunter & Schaefer 1990; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Remafedi, 1987a, 1987b; Savin-Williams, 1994). Gay and bisexual male youth are documented to be at higher risk for conflict with the law (Remafedi, 1987a; Rosario, Hunter, & Gwadz, 1997; Savin-Williams, 1994). However, it must be understood that these youth are not inherently weaker psychologically than are their heterosexual peers; the majority of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are well adjusted and resilient (Mallon, 1997). Rather, these problem-saturated statistics demonstrate the devastating impact of homophobia (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1994).

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth in Systems of Care

The stressors and homophobia that affect lesbian, gay and bisexual youth emphasize the need for our youth-serving agencies to improve their outreach to, and work with, this population. The literature on this population in school, health care, mental health and child welfare systems, has shown that the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are not being adequately met. Homophobia and heterosexism have been well documented in these systems of care (East & El Rayess, 1998; Gonsiorek, 1988; Harris, Nightengale, & Owen, 1995; Jordan, Vaughn, & Woodworth, 1997; Mallon, 1998; Phillips, McMillen, Sparks, & Ueberle, 1997; Telljohann & Price, 1993). Homophobia and heterosexism were found in administrative policy and practice, staff and client attitudes, differential treatment by staff, and lack of information and support for lesbian, gay and bisexual clients. In addition, there were very few openly lesbian, gay and bisexual staff (Governor's Commission of Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993; Heron, 1994; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992).

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth in the Juvenile Justice System

Because of the higher rates of substance abuse, homelessness, and family and school problems, lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are likely to be over-represented in the juvenile justice system (Schaffner, 1998).

Having faced "harsh options" such as homelessness due to familial rejection of their sexual orientation, some of these youth may engage in criminal activity (stealing, prostitution, and selling drugs) to survive (Abinati, 1994, p. 165; Sullivan, 1996). Many got into the system because they acted in ways deemed gender atypical, while others were acting out against society's homophobia (Abinati, 1994; Savin-Williams, 1994; Schaffner, 1998; Sullivan, C., 1996). Laurie Schaffner, a sociologist sampling approximately 150 girls in the juvenile justice system, found that between one fifth to one third were bisexual or lesbian identified (2000). Thus, "lesbian and bisexual girls may form a large, seriously hidden population in crisis among girls in trouble" (Schaffner, 1999, p. 340).

The literature also suggests a lack of recognition and support for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in the juvenile justice system. According to Quang Dang's report for the Human Rights Commission in San Francisco (1997), staff in this system seem to be largely uneducated about this population, often causing these youth to go unrecognized, unserved and in some cases, unprotected (Abinati, 1994; Curtin, 1999; Schaffner, 1998; Vitaly, 1999). As one bisexual girl in the juvenile justice system told this researcher, "(t)he staff don't know we are here. They think we are all straight" (Curtin, 1999). However, life does not necessarily improve when these girls are identified. Many report disparate treatment by staff, such as being denied roommates or being forbidden to shower with other girls. This often serves to strengthen the other girls' homophobia (Ruskola, 1996; Vitaly, 1999; Curtin, 1999). As one client observed: "(When other girls) see the staff treat us different . . . they think they can treat us different too" (Curtin, 1999). The risk of physical and verbal abuse is increased during incarceration (Abinati, 1994; Curtin, 1999). Ironically, the probable over-representation of lesbian and bisexual girls in the system is coupled with a probable over-representation of violent homophobes (Hunter, 1990).

Methodology

This was an exploratory, qualitative study. The purposive, non-random sample consisted of six self-identified lesbian and bisexual young women who are or have been in the juvenile justice system, as well as six individuals who have worked with girls in the system as counselors, probation officers, juvenile hall workers, or advocates. The sample was obtained through personal contacts and referrals from col-

leagues, social service agencies and other participants. The sample of "clients" was very challenging to both locate and to obtain, in part because of invisibility issues and the need for parental consent. Thus, some of this group were in fact adult women who spoke retrospectively about their experiences.

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and a short one-page survey. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and took place in safe, neutral settings, such as the participant's home or office or the researcher's office. Youth were asked specific questions about their sexual orientation, criminal history and experiences with the juvenile justice system. Staff persons were asked about their work history and experiences with lesbian and bisexual girls in this system. In all, six different county juvenile justice systems and one state youth prison were discussed.

This study maintained confidentiality of the participants, and identifying information was distorted to protect participants' identities. Participants signed a consent form, and if under 18, a guardian's consent was also given. The researcher conducted and tape recorded all the interviews, and the tapes were coded to ensure the participant's anonymity. Because some of the youth participants were still on probation, the researcher was aware of possible issues, such as hesitancy to talk about homophobia of staff with whom they are working. The researcher transcribed and analyzed the interviews for both singular and collective themes.

To ensure an accurate interpretation, several steps were taken. First, researcher bias was examined. Potential reactivity factors, such as the researcher's conscious or unconscious influence on the study participants, were also considered. The impact of the researcher's prior work relationship with the staff participants was carefully evaluated. Finally, the researcher attempted to triangulate data from staff and youth. Due to the small sample size, the conclusions cannot be generalized. Yet, because the sample was obtained through diverse avenues, it may be slightly more relevant to the general population than otherwise.

Findings

First, characteristics of the sample are discussed, followed by a summary of the responses to the interview questions about the experience of being lesbian and bisexual in the juvenile justice system, specifi-

cally in relation to policy, other girls, staff, curricula and services. The possible association between struggles with sexual orientation and involvement with this system is examined. Finally, implications for policy, clinical practice, and administration are presented.

Sample

The researcher interviewed six client and six staff participants. The clients ranged in ages from 16–30. Three spoke about their current experience in the juvenile justice system, while the others spoke retrospectively. Three identified as lesbian, two as lesbian/bisexual and one as bisexual. Two identified as African-American, two as Caucasian, one as biracial Latina/Caucasian and the last as biracial African-American/Caucasian. Three identified as working class, two as middle class and one as “poor.” They represented a diversity of charges ranging from assault with a deadly weapon to underage drinking. One young woman had initially been charged with sexual assault for consensual lesbian sex. All had been incarcerated, with time in custody ranging from two days to three years. Five were on probation, ranging from 2–19 years. The youth participants represented experiences in six county juvenile justice systems, six county juvenile halls and one state youth prison.

The staff sample consisted of one male and five females, ranging from 23 to 60 years old. Three identified as heterosexual, one as lesbian, one as bisexual, and the last as “questioning.” Four of the staff participants identified as Caucasian, one as Chicana, and one as African American. The staff reported experience with two juvenile justice systems. Their roles ranged from probation officers and therapists within the juvenile justice system to the director of an advocacy organization for girls in this system. Their work experience ranged from 6 months to 36 years.

Experience of the Juvenile Justice System

All twelve participants stated that this was a difficult and potentially dangerous system for lesbian and bisexual girls. Issues of sexual orientation seem to be ignored by this system, and the experiences of these youth are “significantly overlooked.” As one client shared,

It ain't being recognized. Like they can sit up there and talk about a male and a female but gay and lesbian people ain't being recognized.

This failure to address the topic was present throughout the system, including juvenile hall, probation and the court. For example, one staff shared that the court placed a lesbian, 13-year-old girl with a Fundamental Christian foster family with no discussion of how that might be uncomfortable for her.

However, all acknowledged that when sexual orientation was identified, the system did not respond appropriately. Lesbian and bisexual girls were reportedly mishandled, pathologized and put at risk of physical harm. Because of the danger associated with being out, often lesbian and bisexual girls tried to hide their orientation while in the system. One client shared that she was told that if she was lesbian she would be separated from the rest of the girls. She reported that this experience was devastating for her and contributed to her own internalized homophobia and set back her coming out process.

I (answered) "No, I am straight. No, I am straight. No, no. It is not a problem." I wanted to cry . . . I was hella mad. After that I was like "I really can't come out."

In fact, five of the staff participants worried that the system was further stigmatizing and traumatizing these girls. As one staff said,

I wonder . . . about how their life is now and how much this traumatized them. . . . It would be hard anyway (to be locked up). But (to be) locked up and verbally abused and told that this was a bad, sick thing.

Policies Affecting Lesbian and Bisexual Girls

In the juvenile justice system, many policies and practices are specific to lesbian and bisexual girls. These include being forced to room, shower and dress alone, prohibited from certain duties or activities in custody, subjected to additional criteria for "appropriate" conversation in common space; and receiving less time out of their rooms.

Then (staff) asked me "Are you lesbian? Because if you are, we are going to put you in a room by yourself." It was so I wouldn't try to get at anyone else. Just because I like girls, I ain't going to go try to get at every single one of them!

They also are pressured to be gender-conforming in their appearance, and in some cases gender-atypical lesbian and bisexual girls are encouraged to wear make-up and prohibited from shaving their heads. Other reported policies and practices govern same sex relationships, such as separating girlfriends in custody to different units and jobs

and prohibiting partners not in custody from visiting. This inequity is stark. Reportedly at one facility, if a girl has sex with a boy, three months are added to her sentence, but if she has sex with another girl, six months are added.

Often these policies and practices are not codified. Therefore, the treatment of lesbian and bisexual girls is very subjective, dependent upon individual staff members' comfort and knowledge about sexual orientation. However, even when codified, rules are inappropriately applied. For example, one institution's written policy denied roommates only to girls who have violent or sexual assault charges yet some lesbian and bisexual girls were still withheld roommates solely because of their sexual orientation. The application of rules also seems to be related to a girl's presentation of her sexuality. Many report that if a girl is open about her sexual orientation, is gender atypical or appears "butch," she is subjected to additional rules.

Policies and practices are often not explained. Therefore, girls and staff are left to attribute their own meaning. Many staff participants stated that safety concerns partially motivated these rules, and that staff must be aware that a lesbian or bisexual youth might be attacked by a homophobic peer. Yet, a majority of participants believed that the rules were in place to protect heterosexual girls from "sexual predators." In the end, these rules simply stigmatize lesbian and bisexual girls rather than protect them. As one girl stated, being subjected to these rules caused her to think that the staff "hated (her) sexuality."

All (staff) did was hate on me. All they did was watch me and see what I do. . . . They hardly talked to me about my sexuality but I'd see how they acted. I mean, I am not dumb. . . . When I took my showers, I took my showers alone. Like when I am sitting, when we are having recreation time, I am sitting in the group. . . . (Staff) are all in my grill. They standing by me in case I am doing anything.

Other Girls in the Juvenile Justice System

The other girls in the juvenile justice system were reported to be "homophobic," "harsh," "unaccepting," "judgmental," and "cruel" to the lesbian and bisexual girls. Participants believed such girls to be more homophobic than the general teenage population. This may be attributable to two factors. First, this population is often so damaged that they may have negative reactions to difference. Second, often these girls come from family, street, and ethnic cultures that strongly stigmatize homosexuality.

Every participant reported witnessing openly homophobic peer behavior such as anti-gay name calling and threats of violence. Some reported that girls "out" lesbian or bisexual girls to staff to get them in trouble or to have them removed from their rooms. Girls would also "out" these girls to peers in the system, putting them at risk for physical harm. False flirting and baiting were common. For example, flirting with a lesbian or bisexual girl and then turning her down or telling staff that she was making advances or breaking another rule. As one staff explained,

(Peers) would entice Margaret by saying, "So and so, likes you." And her response would be, "Oh, great. Somebody likes me" and then write them a letter back. And, well, in writing a letter back, that is against the rules.

Many of the girls in the juvenile justice system seemed to hold faulty beliefs that lesbian and bisexual girls are predatory, hypersexual, and even sexually assaultive. Heterosexual assumption is the norm, especially if the girl is gender typical in her appearance. However, not all reported behavior of other girls was negative. Participants shared that some of the other girls had been supportive. In youth prison, where sentences are much longer, the culture was reported to be more accepting of lesbianism and bisexuality.

Staff Attitudes and Treatment of Lesbian and Bisexual Girls

A majority of staff (probation officers, institutional staff, and mental health workers) were reported by all participants to be homophobic and heterosexist. Although some individual staff were said to be supportive, in general they were perceived to be the minority. None of the participants could name any lesbian, gay, or bisexual staff who were "out" to the youth.

Open homophobia, such as name-calling and outing, was also documented among the staff, although less frequently than among the girls. However, staff often failed to intervene in the anti-gay harassment among the girls. They reportedly treated lesbian and bisexual girls differently, such as watching them more closely in common areas or blaming them for conflict because they are being "flamboyant." As one staff said,

The attitude of "Why can't you just act straight while you are here?" . . . It is like, "Wait a minute, you are punishing the wrong person here." Instead of working with the attitudes of homophobia and bigotry, it just

further isolates the kid in a situation where they are already pretty scared.

However, it is difficult to accurately interpret the meaning of this inequitable treatment. As a staff participant stated, in addition to homophobia, it is partly motivated by trying to control large-group behavior, which often means penalizing those who are different.

Staff also seem to hold stereotypical beliefs about lesbian and bisexual girls, including that they are hypersexual, predatory, going through a phase, manifesting abuse issues or trying to "recruit" others to be lesbian and bisexual. Staff reportedly assume heterosexuality and only speak about heterosexual sex, relationships and identity. Even when a girl's sexual orientation is known, staff often choose to ignore it. There seems to be little understanding of the role that the struggle with sexual orientation plays in behavior. In the few incidents reported when staff did actively address a girl's orientation, most appeared to be mishandled: confidentiality was breached; the girl was pressured to "downplay" her sexual orientation; or the girl's sexual orientation was criminalized and pathologized. As one staff put it,

If you are out, I think that is another sort of thing that is tacked on to your deviance. Like, "God, she is just fucked up all around!"

Access to Materials, Information and Counseling About Sexual Orientation

Access to materials, information, and counseling about sexual orientation is severely limited. Few printed materials were available in custody, and what is available is often heterosexist and traditional, such as teen girl magazines, heterosexual romance novels, and bibles. Pro-gay or inclusive publications are considered "inappropriate" and prohibited. Staff may even be putting their jobs at risk by giving girls these materials.

The books that my counselor gave me, she was like, "Joni, if you get caught with these, somebody (else) gave them to you." She would get in trouble for them.

The groups and programs in custody are also very conservative and traditional. The most common groups are bible studies, anger management and Alcoholics Anonymous. All reportedly reinforce institu-

tional heterosexism by only speaking about heterosexual experience. Some are blatantly anti-gay. Curriculum of the institution schools is also not inclusive. Although it includes life skills information about safer sex, partnering and parenting, it again only addresses heterosexual experience. One client shared that she had to teach herself how to have lesbian safer sex.

Access to counseling around issues of sexual orientation is very limited. Often only crisis counseling is offered at juvenile hall, with no programs for issues of sexual orientation. Only a single participant had counseling in custody. She described her therapist as the "only positive force in my life at that time." Youth on probation may have slightly more access to therapy, however, the majority still receive none. One client, who did, stated that it was crucial to the acceptance of her identity and to her ability to make the life changes necessary to exit the system.

(The) turning point in my life was meeting that one counselor. She didn't do it, but she helped me you know? But that's all I needed. All I needed was one person just to say they cared, and you're perfect how you are . . . I care about you, and I want you to do good. . . . And just hearing those things I sprouted out and I changed my life a complete 360.

Possible Relationship Between Criminal Behavior and Sexual Orientation

Consistent with the literature, indicating the higher rates of substance abuse, physical assault, homelessness, depression, family problems and school dropout among lesbian, gay and bisexual youth, five of the youth interviewed had charges related to these problems. One had been charged with sexual assault for consensual lesbian sex. Most had engaged in criminal activity to support themselves on the street, such as selling drugs, survival sex, and theft.

This study indicates that, in some cases, involvement in the juvenile justice system was related to sexual orientation. A direct correlation was seen when a girl's consensual expression of her sexual orientation was literally criminalized as sexual assault or when others appeared to have turned to criminal activity after being thrown out of their homes. Homophobia appeared to precipitate some criminal behavior such as girls becoming physically assaultive in response to taunting. The internal struggle of coming to terms with their sexual orientation, and the resultant low self worth appears to be another reason why

these youth are acting out. One client stated that she felt "lost" and "angry" when trying to come to terms with her stigmatized identity.

I thought I was going to live (only until) I was 21. By the time I turned 21, I couldn't pass as a tomboy anymore and I didn't see beyond it. I didn't see me living my life. I didn't care if I lived or died. But I would never commit suicide, I thought about it a lot . . . I would do things that were suicidal . . . I didn't know who I was. Once I finally found out who I was, I never thought that way again.

Finally, these youth may end up in the juvenile justice system because they are discriminated against by other systems of care, such as the school or child welfare system, and are often without any support. As one staff stated,

Don't be poor. Don't have parents who are using, . . . And it is those young people that don't have a school system that protects them, don't have a family structure that protects them, who get caught up and have to fend for themselves.

Discussion

Lesbian and bisexual girls in the juvenile justice system appear very different than the lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in the literature. They are girls, poor, often of color, acting out, and sometimes mothers. They are unaware of feminism, political choice in sexuality, and support found in communities of women. Because they are modeling their behavior on males in their gangs or crews, they speak about women in more objectifying ways. This may cause them to be misunderstood both by staff in the juvenile justice system (who see them as threats) and by the lesbian, gay and bisexual community (which may not recognize that they are gay). Some return to heterosexuality, either because of their ambivalence or because they need to appear heterosexual to survive on the street. Finally, their multiple marginalized identities deny them support both from the traditional lesbian, gay and bisexual community (which is predominantly white and middle class) and communities of color (which are heterosexual). As one client voiced, "It is sad. Many people are struggling. Where is our community? Who are we?"

Implications for Clinical Practice

This study has multiple implications for clinical practice. Clinicians must be aware of the toxicity of the juvenile justice system for lesbian

and bisexual girls. Experiences in this system may contribute to a girl's internalized homophobia or act as a precipitant to further criminal acting out. All clients interviewed expressed feelings of shame about their sexual orientation and their history in the juvenile justice system. Therefore, clinicians must address these topics directly and non-judgmentally and must strive to create an environment that helps them understand these feelings. Only by familiarizing themselves with the cultures and communities of this population, will clinicians have a context for understanding these girls' seeming ambivalence about their sexual orientation and their tendency to minimize the system's failings. As many of these girls expressed, often a therapist or a counselor in this system was able to make a difference in their lives. Clinicians must be aware that their support is potentially crucial.

Implications for Program Administration

Most of the implications of this study involve program administration; much should be done to change this system's institutional culture of homophobia. Staff training around these issues is needed and staff diversity should be broadened to include openly lesbian, gay and bisexual people and their allies. Group programming, materials, and school curriculum in the juvenile hall must include discussion of lesbian, gay and bisexual issues. Continuous structured conversations with lesbian and bisexual girls about their experience in this system is needed to monitor and optimize changes. Finally, greater access to counseling, accurate and unbiased materials, and lesbian, gay and bisexual support groups are needed.

Current policies adversely affect these girls, their mental health, their acceptance of their sexual identity, and their relationship with other girls. Many practices represent a systemic overreaction to the perceived threat of these girls, treating them as sexual perpetrators rather than sexual minorities. Many policies and practices are left informal, resulting in a gray area open to potential abuse and discrimination. Policies and practices should be re-examined. However, it is also crucial that the staff and administration receive thorough training to address myths and stereotypes. Only then can the current policies and practices be evaluated to determine which are based upon legitimate safety and liability issues and which are an overreaction based on stereotypical beliefs. Finally, because these policies and practices are often not explained, they may be misunderstood by all youth in the system as validating homophobic beliefs and implying that these girls should be treated differently. Hence, policies and proce-

dures must be explained to all girls in a way that minimizes stigma, defuses stereotypes and explains the reasoning behind the rules, e.g. keeping the lesbian or bisexual girl physically safe.

Implications for Future Research

Because so little research on lesbian and bisexual girls in the juvenile justice system exists, further research is necessary. This study found that many times lesbian, gay and bisexual youth go unrecognized by the system. The actual numbers of these youth must be documented. Since this was such a small study, more research is also needed to examine the finding that the system generally fails to address the needs of this population. The apparent connection between struggling with sexual orientation and criminal acting out also merits further study. Because this group is not adequately represented in the literature, the important questions raised by this article about their coming-out processes, environment on the street, and the effect of that environment on their sexual identity warrants further examination.

Conclusion

The juvenile justice system is not adequately meeting the needs of lesbian and bisexual girls. The problems and issues documented in other care systems are also present here. Homophobia and heterosexism exist in policy and practice. Open homophobia is present among the girls and staff. Lesbian and bisexual girls receive disparate treatment, motivated by stereotypes and misinformation, and little or no sensitivity about the impact of sexual orientation on this population exists.

Uniquely, the juvenile justice system creates and enforces rules and practices that systematically treat lesbian and bisexual girls differently from, and in many cases more punitively than, other girls. This makes them more vulnerable and further stigmatizes them. Because these rules are never explained, the message is that lesbian and bisexual girls are different, dangerous, deviant and should be treated accordingly. Consequently, many youth keep their sexual orientation secret, which prevents them from receiving appropriate and supportive services and information.

These girls appear to be one of our most at-risk groups. They have little support in their families, communities and gangs. Often they

have been raised in other systems of care, also homophobic and insensitive to their needs. Because of race and economic status, they are often isolated from the general lesbian, gay and bisexual community. This may deny them the understanding that things could and should be different, making the homophobia they experience potentially even more damaging. These girls need and deserve the support of social workers who can support all their identities, including their sexual identity. The gravity of the problem is clear. Many of our children are being poorly served and stigmatized in this system. Their needs should no longer be ignored.

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