

# Youth Risk Behaviors: Mental Health Behaviors by Sexual Orientation



ILLINOIS YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY, ISSUE 6, FEBRUARY 2011

Research has shown that youth who describe themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual are at an increased risk for a number of negative health outcomes including suicide attempts, sexually transmitted infections and eating disorders.

In Illinois in 2009, questions regarding students' sexual orientation were asked on the high school Youth Risk Behavior Survey for the first time. Using the responses, we determined which students identified as heterosexual and which ones identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or unsure of their sexual orientation (GLBU). This data brief explores differences between GLBU and heterosexual students with regard to the mental health items on the YRBS.

About 8% (n=184) of students identified themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or unsure. There was no difference in gender or grade level between GLBU and heterosexual students. GLBU students were more racially diverse, with more heterosexual students identifying as white.

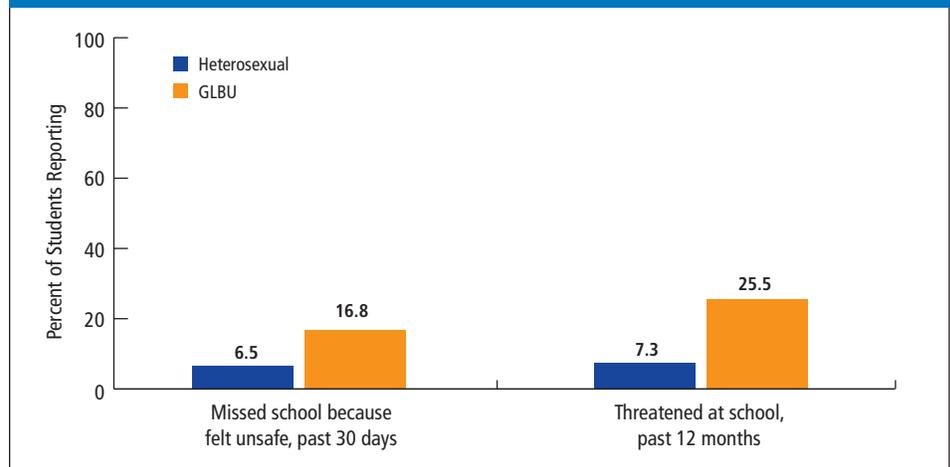
All comparisons between GLBU and heterosexual students presented in this data brief are statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

## GLBU Students More Likely to Be Threatened at School

There has been a great deal of attention recently in the media on the mental health status of students who are gay, lesbian or bisexual or perceived as such. Students have been reported to have committed suicide because of the bullying behavior of classmates.

In Illinois, we see that GLBU students are over 2.5 times more likely to report missing school because they felt unsafe at least one time in the past 30 days compared to their heterosexual peers (Figure 1). Similarly, GLBU students were almost 3.5 times more likely to report being threatened at school in the past 12 months compared to their heterosexual peers.

Figure 1. Percent of high school students reporting school-related behaviors by sexual orientation, 2009



### THE BOTTOM LINE

GLBU students in Illinois more likely to report...

- Missing school because they felt unsafe
- Being threatened at school
- Depressive feelings
- Suicidal thoughts and ideations
- Extreme weight loss methods

### MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES FOR GLBU YOUTH

- GLBT National Hotline: 888.THE.GLNH (843.4564)
- Rainbow Youth Hotline: 877.LGBT.YTH (542.8984)
- LGBT Suicide Prevention Hotline: 800.850.8078 or TheTrevorProject.org
- NAMI: nami.org or 1.800.950.NAMI (6264)
- Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: pflag.org
- Rainbow Heights Club: rainbowheights.org
- Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists: 215.222.2800 or aglp.org
- GayHealth.com: gayhealth.com
- National Foundation for Depressive Illness: depression.org
- Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance: 800.826.3632 or dbsalliance.org
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: 888.333.2377 or afsp.org

Resources compiled by The Mautner Project ([mautnerproject.org](http://mautnerproject.org))



# Over Half of the GLBU Students Reported Having Depressive Feelings

It has been shown in the research literature that gay and lesbian youth are more likely to be depressed and attempt suicide compared to heterosexual youth. Figure 2 illustrates that, in Illinois, students who identified as GLBU were twice as likely to report depressive feelings as those who identified as heterosexual. The same trend can be found when looking at those who considered suicide, made a suicide plan, attempted suicide or were injured as a result of an attempted suicide. It is worth noting that 30% of GLBU students reported making a suicide plan and the same percentage (30%) reported attempting suicide. This speaks to the severity of potential mental health problems among GLBU students.

## GLBU Students More Likely to Participate in Extreme Weight Loss Methods

Figure 3 illustrates the differences in reported rates of extreme weight loss methods by sexual orientation. GLBU students were almost 3 times more likely to report fasting for 24 hours, over 2.5 times more likely to take pills and over 4 times more likely to vomit to lose weight compared to their heterosexual peers. We conjecture that these data speak to negative self-image that many GLBU youth may have, which can also lead to the depressive feelings and suicidal thoughts and ideations presented above.

Figure 2. Percent of high school students reporting depressive feelings and suicide-related behaviors from past 12 months by sexual orientation, 2009

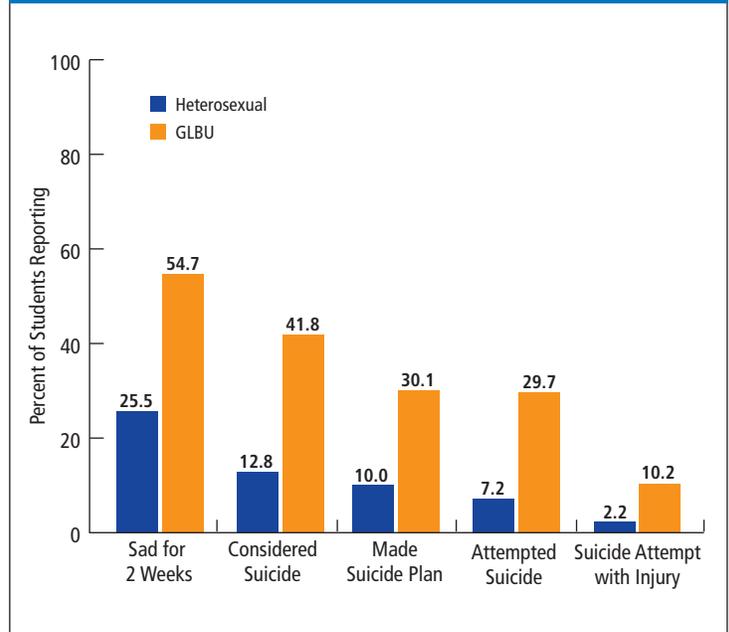
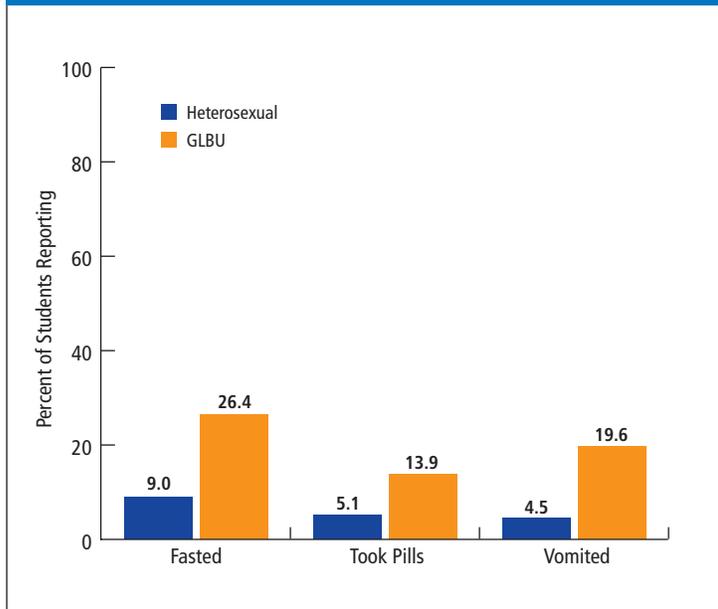


Figure 3. Percent of high school students reporting extreme behaviors to lose weight in the past 30 days by sexual orientation, 2009



### ABOUT THE YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

The Illinois Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) and the Chicago YRBS were completed in randomly selected public high schools in Illinois and Chicago during the spring of 2009. The survey focuses on priority health-risk behaviors that result in the most significant mortality, disability and social problems during both youth and adulthood. Questions cover nutrition, tobacco use, alcohol and other drug use, physical activity, injuries, and sexual behavior resulting in sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. YRBS is one component of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in collaboration with representatives from state and local departments of education and health, other federal agencies, and national education and health organizations. For more information visit [cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/](http://cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/).

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### TIPS FOR PARENTS TO SUPPORT AND PROTECT GLBU YOUTH

[depression.about.com/od/Help/a/LGBT-Youth.htm](http://depression.about.com/od/Help/a/LGBT-Youth.htm)

