



INDIANA UNIVERSITY

PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Center for Research on Inclusion & Social Policy

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LGBTQ+ HOOSIERS: BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

SUMMARY

Young Hoosiers rely on school systems and educators to develop safe and supportive learning environments and expose them to diverse voices. Having access to these environments is particularly important for youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other sexual and gender identities (LGBTQ+). This population experiences increased rates of high-risk behavior¹—like alcohol, drug use, and suicide—often due to feelings of isolation or exposure to bullying.

Statewide attempts to ban books and limit school curricula including LGBTQ+ voices challenge efforts to create safe and supportive classrooms. According to the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, individuals and organizations attempted to ban books 16 times in Indiana in 2023.² Attempting such censorship in schools deters classroom inclusivity and contributes to negative experiences, leading to increased LGBTQ+ student participation in high-risk behaviors.

Research shows that advancing legislation to prioritize the development of safe classroom environments benefits all students. Mandating nondiscrimination policies in schools reduces student stress.³ Additionally, allowing educators to include LGBTQ+ information in their instruction of academic subjects and health education facilitates student safety.⁴ The research reviewed for this brief suggests supporting professional development for educators, funding research regarding LGBTQ+ youth in Indiana, and promoting existing youth-based programs to meet the needs of young Hoosiers.

BACKGROUND

LGBTQ+ is an acronym referring to a community diverse in sexual orientation and gender identity and includes

KEY INSIGHTS

- At least 43,000 LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 13–17 years live in Indiana.
- In Indiana, over 70% of LGBTQ+ students experienced discrimination at school in 2021.
- Unsafe school environments impact the mental and physical health of students. Restricting classroom discussion, curriculum, and books pose barriers to facilitating safe classroom environments.
- Future legislation should:
 - Encourage inclusive classrooms and instruction.
 - Allow students to have LGBTQ+ youth resources and groups.
 - Increase data collection on LGBTQ+ youth experiences.

identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. This acronym sometimes appears with additional sexual orientations and gender identities—LGBTQIA+. The added letters stand for intersex and asexual. Sexual orientation is the emotional and physical attraction to another individual, while gender identity is a personal sense of one's gender. Although often discussed as a single community, it is important to note that LGBTQ+ represents various populations, each with their own unique needs. Table 1 describes keywords and associated definitions the Annie E. Casey Foundation (a charitable organization oriented to improving the lives of American children) developed for discussing the LGBTQ+ population and related topics.⁵

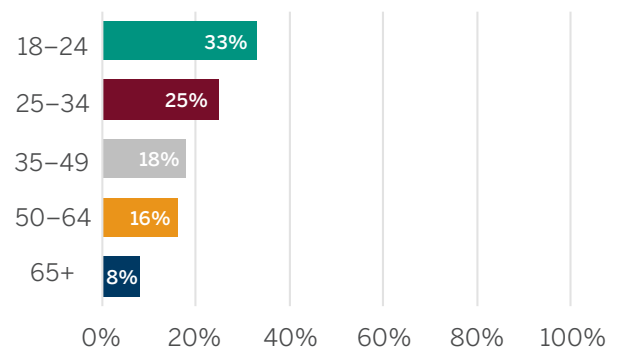
TABLE 1. LGBTQ+ community definitions

COMMON TERM	DEFINITION
Sexual orientation	Emotional/physical attraction that is fluid and includes a variety of labels (LGBTQIA+)
Gender identity	Personal sense of one's gender. Is not visible to others and can match/differ from sex assigned at birth
Gender expression	Gender communication to others through clothing, speech, mannerisms, etc.
Gender fluidity	Describes gender expression/identity change over time
Transgender	A person who has a different gender identity/expression than sex assigned at birth
LGBTQ+	Acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender queer/questioning individuals or the community
Cisgender	A person whose gender identity matches the sex—male or female—originally identified on their birth certificate
Heterosexual	A person who is attracted—physically and emotionally—to individuals of the opposite sex

In recent years, national conversations and legislation regarding the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals—particularly in educational settings and among LGBTQ+ youth—have increased significantly. This increased visibility⁶ and advocacy—along with recognition of the challenges and discrimination these LGBTQ+ individuals face—have heightened attention to their experiences. Notably, the number of same-sex couple households in the United States grew from 995,420 in 2018 to 1,277,189 in 2022, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau.⁷ In 2024, 7% of adults (18+) in the United States identified as LGBTQ+.⁸ This rise emphasizes the need for better understanding and support. Recent trends indicate that, as younger Americans continue to replace older generations of the adult population, self-identification as LGBTQ+ in the United States will increase.⁹

In 2021, 24% of students in the United States identified as gay or lesbian, bisexual, questioning, or other.¹⁰ The Williams Institute—a research center on sexual orientation law and public policy at UCLA—estimated that there were at least 43,000 LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 13–17 years in Indiana in 2022.¹¹ The information in Figure 1 illustrates the varying percentages of LGBTQ+ people in Indiana by age.¹² This brief aims to provide an accurate picture of the current landscape, addressing why it is necessary to focus on these issues now more than ever.

FIGURE 1. Percentage of LGBTQ+ people in Indiana by age



METHODS

Researchers completed a literature review to build a foundation that contextualizes the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and student safety in schools. They compiled data from federal and state sources—such as the United States Census Bureau, the American Medical Association, Indiana University, and the Indiana Youth Institute—and analyzed this information alongside the literature to offer meaningful policy solutions.

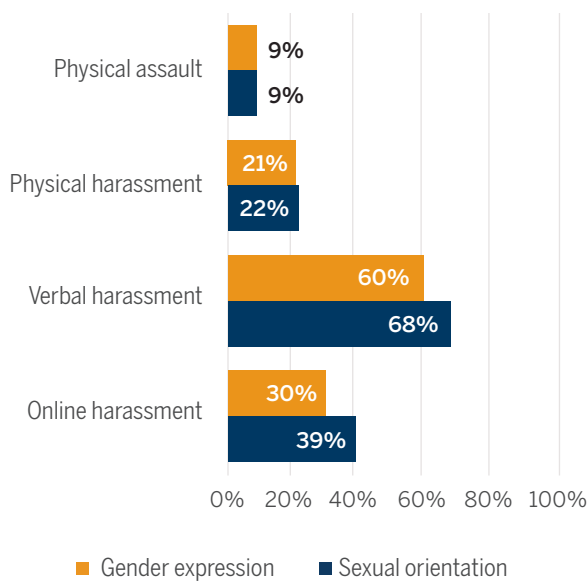
LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN SCHOOLS

EXPERIENCE IN SCHOOLS

LGBTQ+ students continue to face significant challenges in educational environments, which adversely impact their mental health and academic performance. LGBTQ+ students are more likely to report negative experiences like bullying, harassment, and physical violence in classroom settings than their heterosexual and cisgender peers.¹³ In 2021, GLSEN—an educational organization dedicated to ending discrimination, harassment, and bullying based on sexual

orientation and gender identity in schools—carried out a National School Climate Survey¹⁴ to learn what LGBTQ+ students encountered in school environments. A majority of LGBTQ+ students reported hostile school climates. Specifically, 83% of LGBTQ+ students¹⁵ experienced in-person harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation and gender expression.¹⁶ In Indiana, over 70% of LGBTQ+ students experienced some discrimination at school in 2021.¹⁷ Figure 2 illustrates the reported incidence of harassment of LGBTQ+ students, ranging from physical assault to online harassment. At least 60% of respondents said they had experienced verbal harassment based on their gender expression or sexual orientation—the highest reported incident type.

FIGURE 2. Types and prevalence of LGBTQ+ student harassment in Indiana



In situations where a student’s sense of safety is compromised, such as bullying, students become vulnerable to physical injury,¹⁸ suicidal ideation, and depression. In states where schools are not mandated to have a policy prohibiting discrimination, students are more likely to be stressed.¹⁹

These negative experiences often stem from a lack of acceptance and understanding regarding their identities. Supporting the use of preferred names and pronouns fosters a more inclusive and respectful classroom environment.

Research indicates respecting students’ chosen names and pronouns significantly reduces depression and suicidal ideation among transgender and nonbinary youth.^{20,21}

Nationally, 72% of LGBTQ+ students reported their teachers cover no LGBTQ+ topics in their classrooms.²² Students in schools with LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula are less likely to feel unsafe.²³ Unfortunately, the availability of supportive resources has declined. Having fewer inclusive books and resources such as Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs)—student-run organizations that unite LGBTQ+ youth and allies to advocate for and build the community and organize around issues—further exacerbates the challenges LGBTQ+ students face.^{24,25}

BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Educators can develop supportive and inclusive student spaces by introducing diverse perspectives and curricula. Nationally, more than half of educators believe LGBTQ+ topics should be taught in their classrooms.²⁶ Yet systemic barriers impact their ability to create environments in which students can thrive. In recent years, some educators voiced concern²⁷ regarding statewide restrictions on permissible classroom discussions, curriculum, and books. These restrictions often limit students’ exposure to LGBTQ+ topics.

In 2023, book banning occurred in the United States 4,349 times across 23 states and 52 public school districts, including some districts in Indiana.²⁸ Titles that represented the lived experiences of LGBTQ+, Black people, Indigenous people, and other peoples of color made up 47% of the books targeted in these censorship attempts.²⁹ Removing LGBTQ+ books and resources from classrooms cuts down on opportunities for students to learn about diverse perspectives while making students feel isolated and increasing negative mental health effects.³⁰ Being comfortable in school supports students’ mental health,³¹ reducing the likelihood that they will engage in such high-risk behaviors as alcohol use or attempted suicide.³²

Transgender youth can feel particularly unsafe in schools. In Indiana, over 70% of transgender youth reported they could not use the bathroom at school that aligned with their gender.³³ LGBTQ+ students have also reported they have

not been able to use their preferred names or pronouns in school.³⁴

Data indicates such negative experiences contribute to increased reports of anxiety, depression, and suicide risk among LGBTQ+ youth.³⁵ In 2022, 44% of LGBTQ+ youth aged 13–17 years seriously considered suicide in the past year.³⁶

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE LEGISLATION

Legislation impacting school environments should ensure the safety of all students, regardless of their identity. Prioritizing inclusive instruction in the classroom, making LGBTQ+ youth-focused resources available, and collecting more data related to LGBTQ+ youth in Indiana are measures that can be implemented to raise awareness of the scope of their needs.

INCLUSIVE INSTRUCTION AND CLASSROOMS

Expanded educational resources and training may help teachers and school administrators create an inclusive environment and curriculum for all students. In 2023, California passed the Safe and Supportive Schools Act, requiring teacher and staff training about inclusive classroom environments and addressing the challenges LGBTQ+ students face in schools.³⁷ The Safe and Supportive School Act provided three-year grants of \$100,000 to \$175,000 for schools to implement programming to improve study experience and school climate indexes (SCI). SCI were based upon selected indicators—such as school safety, school connectedness, and student incident data—to measure overall school climate and safety needs over time.³⁸

With Safe and Supportive Act programming, 4 out of 5 schools improved their SCI, almost all experienced reductions in violence and substance abuse, and half saw decreases in harassment and bullying.³⁹ Legislation like the Safe and Supportive Schools Act ensures all students receive access to quality education and support. All educators should have access to such educational materials and professional development to make their classrooms inclusive.⁴⁰

In 2020, Illinois lawmakers passed a bill requiring public schools to include instructional materials that accurately portray the political, economic, and social contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals.⁴¹ Including books, discussions, and other materials with information about the LGBTQ+ community and its history is important for developing an inclusive curriculum.⁴² Education about the LGBTQ+ community should focus on relationships instead of labels.⁴³ Discussions should educate students about how members of the LGBTQ+ community live, whom they love, and with whom they build family and community.⁴⁴

Learning about diverse identities and experiences encourages students to build empathy and understand experiences different from their own.⁴⁵ Exposing all students to diverse historical backgrounds in the classroom encourages critical thinking about stereotypes and promotes acceptance of LGBTQ+ peers. Inclusive curricula validate the experiences of LGBTQ+ students, reinforce their self-worth, and allow their voices to be heard.⁴⁶

INCREASING LGBTQ+ RESOURCES AND GROUPS

Providing students with support services in schools can offer a sense of belonging for students and promote diversity. Various services or opportunities should be provided, ranging from mental health counseling to peer-based organizations and educational resources for all levels of staff and students.

Student-led GSAs allow students to advocate and promote understanding of gender identities and sexuality in schools and can increase the comfort of LGBTQ+ students.⁴⁷ Permitting student participation in GSAs can reduce discrimination and bullying in school settings.⁴⁸ Positive student outcomes—regardless of sexual and/or gender identity—improve in schools with a GSA presence.⁴⁹

Staffing schools with mental health providers is important so all students have someone to talk to in times of need. LGBTQ+ youth often relate best to counselors, psychologists, and social workers. Therefore, increasing staff in these areas could boost students' comfort in schools.⁵⁰ Additionally, schools can empower teachers to be advocates for their LGBTQ+ students. Students report feeling safer at school when a teacher or staff member is an ally.⁵¹

INCREASING DATA COLLECTION

A lack of available data regarding LGBTQ+ youth in schools prevents fully understanding students' experiences. The demographic information collected from students often does not include LGBTQ+ identities,⁵² and state K-12 enrollment data provides only male or female identities.⁵³ Few publications have examined the impact of the book bans from classrooms on LGBTQ+ youth. Increasing data collection regarding LGBTQ+ youth can improve the quality of student classroom experiences by providing a more nuanced view of the identities and needs of Hoosier students.⁵⁴

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The Center for Research on Inclusion and Social Policy (CRISP) addresses complex social issues at the intersection of equity and policy through community-engaged research. CRISP analyzes and disseminates community-relevant research about social disparities and policy issues to help leaders and residents around Indiana make informed decisions. CRISP is housed within the IU Public Policy Institute, which also supports the Center for Health and Justice Research (CHJR) and the Manufacturing Policy Initiative (MPI).

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