

Vermont Department of Mental Health Mental Health Minute

Spring 2024

Current Topic: Community Connection

Connecting with people in the community and feeling like you “matter” can have many social and health benefits. It can provide social connectedness, meaning, purpose, and can even impact physical health. Research demonstrates that contribution to a community during adolescence – a period of pivotal brain development – is important for healthy social

and emotional growth.^{1,2} Adolescents that identify as a sexual minority (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual) or a gender minority (i.e. transgender³) face unique challenges connecting with people in their communities, especially in rural areas like Vermont. Finding supportive environments may help reduce the development of mental health concerns.⁴

Why is This Important?

The Vermont Department of Mental Health and the Vermont Child Health Improvement Program (VCHIP) are working together to improve our understanding of how community connection is related to mental health for Vermont’s youth. We are interested in

promoting policy and programming that contribute to and enhance community connection with the goal of improving mental health outcomes for all Vermont children, including those that identify as sexual or gender minorities.

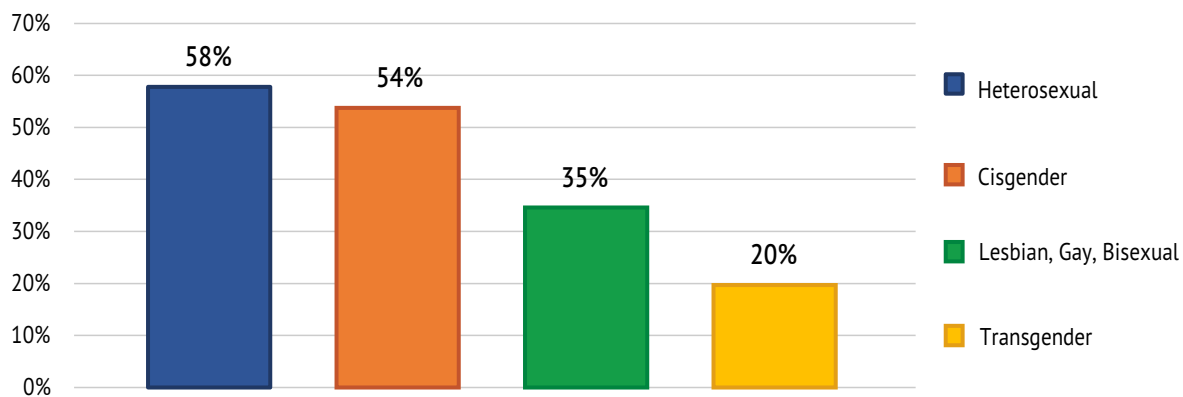
What do Vermont adolescents have to say about their gender and sexual identities, community connection and mental health?

Every two years, Vermont assesses health risk behaviors of middle and high school students using the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The YRBS is a national, classroom-based survey that serves as an important public health tool to better understand the state’s youth, their identities, and the challenges they face⁵.

Approximately 30,000 Vermont students completed the 2021 YRBS⁶. For this 2021 analysis of high school student respondents, we looked at several questions related to sexual orientation and community connection:

- ‘Which of the following best describes you? A) Heterosexual (straight), B) Gay or lesbian, C) Bisexual, or D) I describe my sexual identity some other way.’
- ‘Some people describe themselves as transgender when their sex at birth does not match the way they think or feel about their gender. Are you transgender?’
- ‘Do you agree or disagree that in your community you feel like you matter to people?’

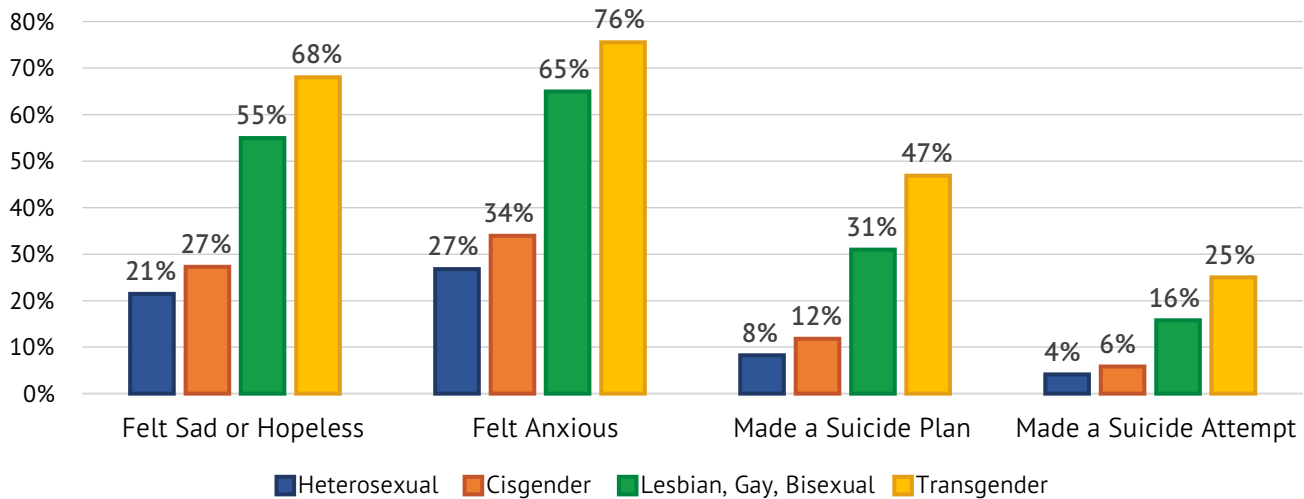
Figure 1 shows that over 50% of students identifying as heterosexual or cisgender⁷ feel community connection. Students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender are significantly less likely to feel community connection.



Several other questions asked about students' mood, anxiety and suicidal ideation:

- 'During the past 12 months, did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that you stopped doing some usual activities?'
- 'During the past 12 months, how often have you been bothered by feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge?'
- 'During the past 12 months, did you make a plan about how you would attempt suicide?'
- 'During the past 12 months, how many times did you actually attempt suicide?'

Figure 2 demonstrates the much greater prevalence of feeling sad, feeling anxious, and suicidal behaviors in students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender compared to students identifying as heterosexual or cisgender. It is well known that mental health concerns are lower in heterosexual and cisgender students compared to their sexual and gender minority peers.



How is community connection related to mental health?

A deeper dive into the data revealed an important connection. When students felt like they mattered to their communities, mental health concerns were lower.

We found this association to be particularly strong among students identifying as sexual or gender minorities.

Figure 3a: Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual Students Who Feel Community Connection Have Lower Prevalence of Mental Health Concerns

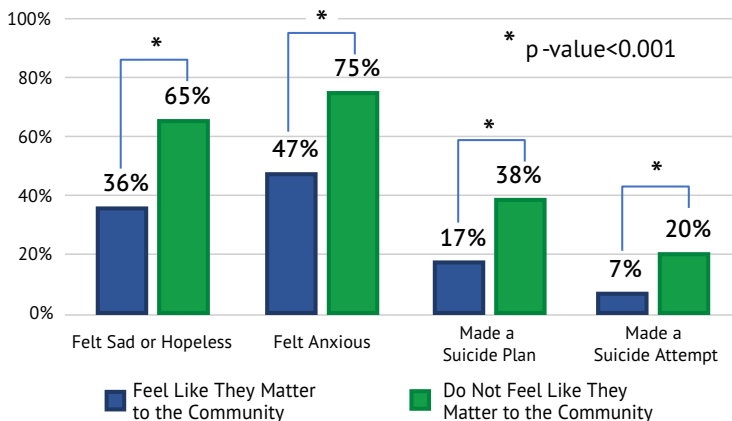
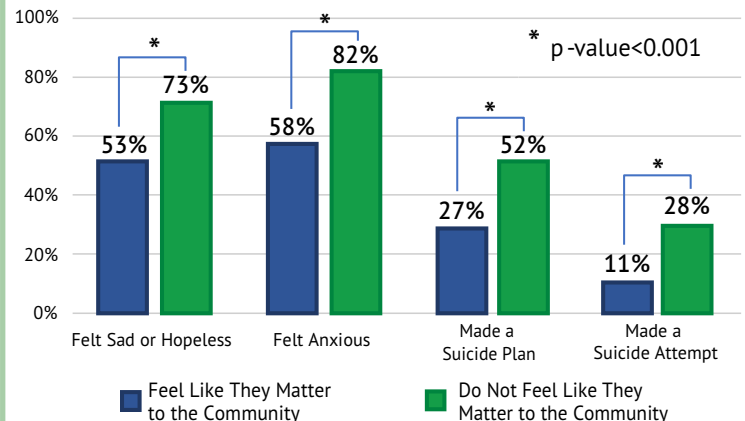


Figure 3b: Students Identifying as Transgender Who Feel Community Connection Have Lower Prevalence of Mental Health Concerns



Among high school students identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Figure 3a), those reporting they did NOT feel like they mattered to their community were significantly more likely to report feeling sad or hopeless (29% higher), feeling anxious (28% higher), making a suicide plan (21% higher), and making a suicide attempt (13% higher), than those reporting they felt like they mattered to their community.

For students identifying as transgender (Figure 3b), the findings are even more striking. Those reporting they did NOT feel like they mattered to the community were significantly more likely to report feeling sad or hopeless (20% higher), feeling anxious (24% higher), making a suicide plan (25% higher), and making a suicide attempt (17% higher), than those reporting they felt like they mattered to the community. Lesser feeling of community

connection was also linked to greater mental health concerns among heterosexual and cisgender students, but overall mental health concerns were much lower in these majority groups. It will be important to study further if programs to promote community

connection could be protective against developing mental health concerns, especially among students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

What can we do about it?

“Community” means many things to many people, but the importance of feeling like one belongs to a group with shared meaning, goals, interests, or identities cannot be overstated. Positive social environments not only provide support, they also allow youth to contribute to others in meaningful ways, which is essential for building confidence, identity and relational skills during the adolescent developmental stage. These findings from the Vermont YRBS suggest that by creating opportunities

for meaningful community connection among Vermont youth, particularly those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, we may improve mental health outcomes, decrease risk of isolation and suicidality, and foster healthy social and emotional growth. Whether through social clubs, civic engagement, religious or ethnicity-centered organizations or school communities, Vermont’s high school students need to hear the message loud and clear: “you matter.”

References and Notes

1. Fuligni, A. J. (2019). The need to contribute during adolescence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 14(3), 331-343.
2. Burrow, A., Hill, P., Williams, J.L., Dahl, R., Fuligni, A., Masten, C., and the National Scientific Council on Adolescence (2023). *Cultivating Purpose in Adolescence*, Council Report No. 3. Retrieved from <https://developingadolescent.org>
3. Transgender means one’s gender identity or expression does not match the gender they were assigned at birth.
4. McDonald, K. (2018). Social support and mental health in LGBTQ adolescents: A review of the literature. *Issues in mental health nursing*, 39(1), 16-29.
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report: https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrb/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf
6. Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey: <https://www.healthvermont.gov/stats/population-health-surveys-data/youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrb>
7. Cisgender means one’s gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth.