



Understanding Anti-Gay Harassment and Violence in Schools

A Report of the Five Year Research Project of the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State

January 1999

Executive Summary

The **Safe Schools Coalition** is a public-private partnership of seventy-four offices, agencies and organizations as well as many individuals. Its mission is to help make Washington State schools safe places where every family can belong, where every educator can teach, and where every child can learn, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

The **Safe Schools Project** (one activity of the Coalition) was a five-year, statewide qualitative study examining the phenomenon of anti-gay harassment and violence in schools, kindergarten through grade twelve. All the incidents and patterns of harassment described in this report occurred at school or partly on school property, or on the way to or from school, or at a school-sponsored event, such as a field trip or a basketball game. In five school years, **one hundred forty six incidents** have been reported to the Project. **One hundred and eleven** met the Project's criteria as examples of Washington State, school-based anti-gay harassment and violence.¹

- ◆ The hundred and eleven incidents we analyzed came from:
 - at least **73 schools**, including seven elementary schools, fifteen junior high and middle schools, forty high schools, and eleven other schools (alternative schools, a reservation school, a private school).
 - at least **37 public school districts** (urban, suburban, small town and rural)
 - **13 counties**.
- ◆ The incidents included:
 - eleven in which no specific individual was targeted (e.g., anti-gay slurs, sometimes expressed by teachers).
 - one hundred others, in which a total of 148 individuals were harassed or attacked, including:
 - * eight incidents in which all of the targeted people were adults.
 - * ninety-two incidents in which students were harassed or attacked ... in seven cases, by adults. (In eighteen other cases, adults were not the offenders per se, but they did something that actively contributed to a student's feeling harmed. For example, one principal made a young lesbian start changing for PE by herself, away from the locker room, after her classmates began verbally harassing her.)
- ◆ Adults responded in various ways to these ninety-two incidents in which students were targeted:

¹ See Methodology in this report for a list of these criteria and discussion of the remaining thirty-five reports

- In one-third of incidents, **adults did nothing**. In ten of these cases, at least one adult was supportive, but none took protective action. In the other cases, the adults were silent or blaming.
 - In one-third of incidents, **at least one adult stood up for a child** (even if others were not supportive). These adults included parents and guardians; teachers, counselors, school secretaries, principals and vice principals; district-level administrators; staff people from community agencies; school security guards, police officers, a school bus driver and a referee. Some of their stories offer creative strategies as models for others.
 - In one-third of incidents **there were no adult witnesses and the problem was never reported to school employees** or adults' responses are unknown. Some of these were never called to adults' attention because students feared their responses. In some cases previous requests for help had been allegedly denied or disparaged.
- ◆ By category of offense, the one-hundred and eleven incidents counted by the Project have included:
- **Eight gang rape incidents** in which a total of 11 people were raped. Two of those who were raped were sixth graders. Theirs was the only rape incident that a respondent said had been reported to the police. This respondent did not say whether the offenders were charged or convicted.
 - **Twenty-two other physical assaults** on a total of 24 people. They were hit, kicked, punched, and/or injured with weapons. Seven were treated by a doctor or a nurse (four in hospitals and emergency rooms) for cuts, contusions, cracked ribs and/or broken bones.
 - **Seventeen cases of physical harassment and/or sexual assault, short of rape**. These included such things as offenders spitting on someone, throwing something at them, cornering them, pushing them around, pulling their clothes up or off or down, or grabbing or groping them.
 - **Thirty-eight cases of on-going verbal and other harassment**. In these cases, an offender wrote graffiti about a person, for example, or "outed" them (spread rumors about their sexual orientation), threatened to harm or kill them, or publicly humiliated them on an on-going basis.
 - **Twenty-six one-time, climate setting incidents**. These entailed things such as name-calling, offensive jokes, etc. In one incident, a first grader was called "faggot" on the playground. Perplexed and embarrassed, he later asked his father what it meant. The father explained it was a derogatory term for gay people. His child wasn't traumatized by the incident, but the father was troubled enough to call the Safe Schools Project.
- ◆ The ratio of offenders to the people they targeted was at least **2½ against 1**.
- ◆ What made the offenders think the 148 people they targeted in these 111 incidents were gay or lesbian? From reports, we know that:
- 38 people had defended the civil rights of sexual minorities or had GLBT friends.
 - 34 people were openly gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT).
 - 31 people were apparently perceived to fit GLBT stereotypes (e.g., girls with short hair, a boy who was soft-spoken and who studied during free time).
 - 23 people were attacked for no apparent reason. Some callers did not say or did not know why the offenders had attacked these particular individuals. Others were not sure the offenders had even believed their targets to be gay; they may have simply been using an anti-gay slur in a teasing or an angry way.
 - 15 people had come out privately (e.g., to a friend or sibling) as a sexual minority and their confidentiality was broken.
 - 5 people were "found out" (e.g., their diary was stolen or their locker broken into).
 - 2 people were attacked as gay because they had HIV.
- ◆ At least seven of those who were targeted were self-identified as heterosexual.
- ◆ Twelve children and youth changed schools (in some cases, multiple times) to try to escape the abuse. **Ten young people eventually dropped out** (including three who had changed schools first).
- ◆ Ten young people attempted suicide. **Two young people committed suicide**. (One suicide was reported by a young man's mother and the other, which followed suicide attempts, was reported by a close friend.)