



Peer and Family Belongingness Impact on the Mental Health of Black LGBTQ+ Youth

What this research is about

Black LGBTQ+ youth and emerging adults face multiple stressors in their daily lives. Currently, there is a lack of studies on the impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Living at the intersection of racism, homophobia, and transphobia, these youth face more barriers and challenges than other youth. Black LGBTQ+ youth also report greater feelings of rejection and isolation. Professional practitioners, social workers, and educators lack the knowledge to create and apply appropriate supports and interventions due to the lack of evidence.

This study seeks to understand the relationships between family and peer belongingness and the mental health outcomes of Black LGBTQ+ youth. Family and peer belongingness have been found to act as protective factors among LGBTQ+ youth.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from a larger study conducted in 2016 called the Project #Queery Study. This study was an online survey of LGBTQ+ youth and young adults between the ages of 14 and 29 who were residing in Canada and the United States. The survey asked about participants' engagement with online technologies, health and mental health, identity development, and community involvement.

For this study, the researchers used a subset of data collected from Black LGBTQ+ participants from the larger study. The final sample included responses from 181 participants. The average age was 18. A total of 154 respondents lived in the United States and 26 lived in Canada. Participants reported a range of sexual orientations and gender identities, including transgender men and women, non-binary/gender independent, queer, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and lesbian.

What you need to know

Creating mental health interventions and support systems for individuals living at the intersection of multiple minority identities can be challenging. For Black youth who are also a sexual and/or gender minority, there is a lack of professional support due to limited studies on how stresses faced by the Black LGBTQ+ population affect mental health and wellbeing. A sense of belonging, whether as part of a family or a group of peers, has been shown to have positive mental health impacts.

This study uses survey data to explore how feelings of family and peer belongingness impact depression, anxiety, and self-rated mental health in Black LGBTQ+ youth. Researchers found that higher levels of family and peer belongingness are associated with lower levels of depression, but there is no effect on anxiety. Family belongingness is also associated with better self-rated mental health.

The researchers tested the impact of peer and family belongingness on depression, anxiety, and self-rated mental health. Age and gender were included as control variables in the analyses to take into account their effects on mental health outcomes.

What the researchers found

The findings showed that higher levels of peer and family belongingness were associated with lower levels of depression. But peer and family belongingness did not affect anxiety. Furthermore, family belongingness was associated with better self-reported mental health.

The researchers inferred three implications for practitioners working with this population from

these results. First, family belongingness could be an important factor for the mental wellbeing of Black LGBTQ+ youth and young adults. Family belongingness includes an acceptance of the gender identity of these youth by their family.

Second, while family belongingness was associated with better self-rated mental health, peer belongingness was not. This may be due to differences between self-rated and diagnostic indicators of mental health. Another explanation could be that self-perception of mental health can be impacted by systemic stressors that Black youth may experience, like racism. Family belongingness may be protective against the negative influences of racism, whereas peer belongingness may not.

Third, the finding that depression, but not anxiety, was related to family and peer belongingness has implications for mental health interventions for Black LGBTQ+ youth and young adults. Practitioners may want to consider interventions that foster a sense of belongingness to support Black LGBTQ+ youth and young adults with depression. Further research is needed to identify factors that impact the perception of family and peer belongingness among Black LGBTQ+ youth and young adults. This would help gain insight into the mental wellbeing of these youth.

How you can use this research

Social workers, educators, and practitioners should have training in different models of interventions to support people who have multiple marginalized identities related to their race, sexuality, and gender. Practitioners could use tools that assess belongingness including support, connection, and acceptance. Future research could examine the role of family in shaping a sense of self, as well as how having no family contact impacts the mental health and wellbeing of Black LGBTQ+ youth.

About the researchers

Keith J. Watts is affiliated with the College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, Kentucky, USA. **M. Alex Wagaman** is affiliated with the School of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, USA. **Andrew D. Eaton** is affiliated with the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Regina in Regina,

Saskatchewan, Canada. **Vivian W. Y. Leung** and **Shelley L. Craig** are affiliated with the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Questions about this study can be sent to Keith Watts at keithiwatts@uky.edu.

Citation

Watts, K. J., Wagaman, M. A., Eaton, A. D., Leung, V. W. Y., & Craig, S. L. (2023, September 27). Examining the role of peer and family belongingness in the mental health of Black LGBTQ+ youth. *Child & Youth Services*. Advance online publication. <http://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2023.2261364>

Study funding

This study was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Grant.

Research Snapshot by Erika Cao

About the Vanier Institute of the Family

The Vanier Institute of the Family has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots.

The Vanier Institute is a national, independent think tank committed to enhancing family wellbeing by making information about families accessible and actionable. Positioned at the centre of networks of researchers, educators, policymakers, and organizations with an interest in families, we share evidence and strengthen the understanding of families in Canada, in all their diversities, to support evidence-based decisions that promote family wellbeing.

Learn more about the Vanier Institute by visiting vanierinstitute.ca or emailing info@vanierinstitute.ca.