

Recommended Reading

TEENS IN THE WILD

I'm gay myself — but even I was shocked by this new Irish survey, says **DECLAN CASHIN**

It's rotten being a teenager — and a report released this week found that those turbulent years can be even tougher in this country if you happen to be gay.

Indeed, a shocking level of general harassment and discrimination emerged from the detailed survey of 1,110 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people aged between 14 and 73, with some 40pc of all respondents saying they had been threatened with physical violence and 25pc reporting being punched, kicked or beaten at some point.

But the study into mental health and wellbeing identified gay people aged between 14 and 21 as being particularly vulnerable, especially if the young person is isolated or too afraid to come out to anyone. Within that age group, 27pc admitted to self-harming while an alarming 17.7pc had actually attempted suicide.

As a gay man myself, I knew anecdotally and from my own experience that there were still barriers to be overcome, despite huge advances for Irish gay people over the past 15 years. Still, I was really taken aback to see the scale of the problem laid bare in cold, hard figures. But while it made for disheartening reading at first, there were positives to be gleaned from the research too.

It can be no coincidence that the age group most at risk is the one that's still in secondary school, and the report finds homophobic bullying, abusive name-calling and threats are still an issue for over half of current school-goers. A small number (8pc) reported being called names by teachers.

One respondent, a 23-year-old man, told how he left school after his Junior Cert because of "being jumped on and called puff and queer every day. The teachers just didn't care".

"The problem is that homophobic bullying in school just isn't being addressed properly," says Michael Barron of BelongTo, a gay youth group that has run an anti-homophobia campaign within schools.

"Bigotry against other minority students isn't tolerated, and rightly so, but that doesn't seem to be the case with homophobia. That can leave young people feeling very helpless because, by law, they must attend school and they can't just up and leave."

Having said that, Mr Barron stresses that the report is not as grim as it sounds. "Young people now have a more positive attitude about what it means to be LGBT than the older group in the research," he says.

"They have a higher level of comfort with their identity, which is a very important shift in attitudes. Even with bullying in schools, it's still a good sign that kids feel they can come out at a younger age and that certainly wouldn't have happened 10 to 15 years ago. It's a minority who are experiencing the more serious issues like harassment and bullying which lead to self harm and attempted suicide.

"Combating homophobic bullying in schools is a challenge, but I think there is goodwill out there amongst principals, counsellors and teachers."

TEENS IN THE WILD

The survey found that the average age a young person realises they are gay is 14, while the average age they come out to others is 21. "It's a huge cause of stress if a teenager feels like he can't express his true identity," says Odhran Allen, director of mental health strategy with the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN).

'They have the normal teenage challenges, but then this loneliness and fear of rejection, on top of homophobia in school and elsewhere, is what leads to the mental health findings in this report.

"The self-harm stats are particularly worrying. Amongst the general population, the rate of repeated self-harm, such as cutting, is 23pc. In this study, the rate of repeated self-harm amongst LGBT people is 85pc."

It might seem obvious but, according to the report, the key to preventing emotional and psychological distress amongst young gay people is to gain support from family and friends.

"The majority of people found coming out to be a far more positive experience than they had anticipated," Mr Allen explains.

What's more, the study goes as far as to credit gay people for the resilience they develop in overcoming harassment and discrimination while growing up. "The vast majority of those surveyed -- 81pc -- said they were now comfortable with their sexual identity and leading happy lives," Mr Allen explains.

"Those respondents said the support of family and friends was critical in achieving that. It helped them to develop a more positive image of themselves, and to build their self-esteem. Over two-thirds of respondents were out to their families. That's very encouraging."