

Services for Same Sex Attracted Young People in the City of Port Phillip.



I've always known I was sexually attracted to the same sex. I've learnt very quickly (especially at school) that homosexuality isn't tolerated in our society. I feel there's a part of me that I can't express and hate my life. I can't imagine that ever changing
(Brook, 14 years)

Hillier L., Turner, A., & Mitchell, A. (2005) *Writing Themselves in Again*

Authors - Ben Waterhouse and John Mitchell

Editors – Peter Streker, Chris Ellard

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Introduction and research rationale

It has been established that somewhere between 8% and 11% of young people experience sexual attraction toward people of their own sex (Hillier, et al. 2005). Unfortunately there are significant health and well being risks associated with identifying as a Same Sex Attracted Young Person (SSAYP), including exposure to homophobia and discrimination, physical and verbal abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, depression, anxiety and homelessness.

DISCRIMINATION AND ABUSE

Homophobia and discrimination are an unwelcome part of life for many SSAYP, with current research indicating that 38% of these young people experience unfair treatment solely on the basis of their sexual identity (Hillier et.al. 2005). This type of treatment is not only damaging to health, it is illegal within Australia.

Verbal and physical abuse is another aspect of life that many of these youth must face. Hillier et al. reported that 44% of youth experience verbal abuse in the workplace, schoolyard or family dynamic and 16% have experienced physical abuse as a result of their sexuality

I was walking home...a group of six 12 year olds were teasing me when they asked if I was gay. I stupidly said yes. They tripped me to the ground and then kicked me until a car stopped and they ran away

(Victor 20 years)

My boy friend and I were punched at (the local) beach. A group of about seven guys mainly in their early 20s were around and two of them laid into me and my boy... I was hospitalised and lucky not to have a broken jaw, only fractures. My boy has had back pains ever since

(Vance, 17 years)

Hillier et al (2005)

DRUG & ALCOHOL ABUSE

Although drug and alcohol abuse are not exclusive to SSAYP, the prevalence of drug use remains substantially higher than for heterosexual youth. For example, over double the number of SSAYP have injected drugs (Hillier et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, the prevalence of alcohol use and abuse was approximately the same compared to the heterosexual population.

...continued harassment and verbal abuse...gave me depression, and i started smoking weed, so i could get away from everything in my life, and people i was associated with, it was a social thing. I still smoke today! (Peter 18 years)

Hillier et al. (2005)

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

One of the most concerning indicators from previous research is the reported rates of self-harm and rates of depression experienced by SSAYP. Nicholas and Howard reported that SSAYP are more likely to cut themselves, attempt self-mutilation, suicide and experience depression (2001) Hillier, Turner and Mitchell reported that 35% of respondents had thought about or succeeded in harming themselves although these findings were related to abuse. Youth experiencing abuse were far more likely to be manifesting self – harm behaviour and depression.

I cut myself when I was 13 down my arms and legs and tried to overdose on hay fever pills... I just go home and curl up on my bed with a piece of wire in my hand, music in my ears and sometimes try to overdose on pills. The thoughts of killing myself are always on my mind but I know I don't want to die. It's like flirting with the escape route from my pain.
(Astrid, 15 years)
Hillier et al (2005)

The current SSAYP project is a response to recommendations from the City of Port Phillip 2004 SSAYP forum and previous research. Both of these initiatives have highlighted the necessity for SSAYP friendly services within all councils and municipalities. Recommendations from the 2004 forum included requests to address the following areas of concern for SSAYP:

- School Education
- Cultural development
- SSAYP dedicated workers specifically support, promotion, advocacy, education
- Safe places for meeting that are inclusive of all kinds of sexual orientation
- Communication via Internet, groups, magazines, more forums.

The primary objectives of this project were to:

- Investigate current services within the City of Port Phillip by exploring their availability and utilisation.
- Provide a set or recommendations to help increase service utilisation.

Method

To most accurately address the research objectives a qualitative framework was adopted. This involved carrying out needs assessment of service providers within the municipality. Through this stage of the project six service providers were contacted and site visits were carried out. Site visits involved unstructured interviews with youth workers and project managers. Due to the transient nature of all youth, some service providers within the City of Stonnington and the City of Melbourne were also visited. In total seven youth service providers were visited and the following findings were reached.

General views on youth services

There are several youth services within the City of Port Phillip that don't specifically cater for SSAYP but believe they may have some of these young people utilising their services. The general rule throughout these services is that they don't do anything differently for SSAYP. There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach. An advantage includes helping to maintain a high level of the service delivery.

Two of the service providers mentioned:

“No doubt that SSAYP have specific need, we just don't go there and we probably should be doing more. Yet I believe these youth use our service and feel comfortable”

“It is most unlikely that SSAYP status would be a barrier to anyone approaching a service provider in this day and age. Some young people may not be aware of this and it is very important for agencies to make it clear that they provided a safe and supportive service to SSAYP clients.”

Unfortunately specific necessities may be neglected through these one-size fits all approaches. For example, higher rates of drug injection abuse within the SSAYP population could be neglected if service providers aren't aware of young peoples' sexual identity. Connecting youth to more formalised support groups is also

problematic if service providers aren't aware of a clients SSAYP status and the existence of support groups. This is not to say that all SSAYP need to identify as same sex attracted. Nevertheless, they should feel free to do so if they wish. This would enable the service providers to refer SSAYP specific support groups if requested and to accommodate their service accordingly.

The Victorian AIDS Council runs FRESH, a successful support program for young HIV positive people. Eligibility for this support program requires the individual to be HIV positive or a supporter of HIV positive friend/family. This group doesn't specifically cater for any gender or sexual orientation but there is some crossover between this group and SSAYP youth, with some of these young people utilising this service. In the past there have been a few cases of youth lying about being HIV positive to utilise this support group. This is problematic for other users of the group and the program managers. This type of behaviour is an example of how valuable these support groups can be and further highlights the necessity for more SSAYP specific services within the municipality.

Schools

Although no schools were directly contacted throughout the research, several of the service providers visited have worked with local schools addressing issues of homophobia and discrimination. Service providers reported that their work was most successful when there was a 'champion' or SSAYP friendly individual already working in the school. This 'champion' may have contacted the service providers requesting a 'one off' or 'series of visits' to help develop a SSAYP friendly environment and assist with educating students and staff. In some cases service providers have contacted the schools themselves. However, it was reported that it only takes one complaining parent and the educational programs can be prevented from reaching the students and stopped all together.

One of the most problematic aspects of this situation is the fact that the most homophobic and discriminatory schools don't receive any educational or support programs as they are unwelcoming to the idea. Unfortunately, this means the most homophobic school cultures are very difficult to access. Other problematic aspects of

working with schools have included, delivering one-day programs for secondary schools as mentioned...

“One day isn’t long enough to develop a rapport and bring around change in school culture or ways of thinking. So the children often dismiss the day or session and simply move on with their previous preconceptions. For any beneficial work to occur, ongoing school support is essential.”

It was recommended that ongoing support be provided when working with schools, as a significant cultural change can’t be achieved through one or two educational seminars. There isn’t one simple model that fits all schools. It is a matter of addressing each school individually. Working with staff was also viewed as extremely important. Staff have a greater ability to influence school culture than most youth workers and addressing homophobia in staffing cultures is just as important as addressing youth homophobia. Ironically, the most accessible and accommodating schools usually have one or more individuals that support a SSAYP friendly environment. As a result some service providers believed they were ‘preaching to the converted’. This leads to some frustration. One youth worker mentioned:

“Some schools support a same sex attracted friendly environment and some schools simply reject the idea. Some schools will come to the party and some simply will not.”

“It will take time and commitment and all schools will eventually come around”

SSAYP- specific services

There are currently no operational SSAYP specific services within the City of Port Phillip. There are three options listed below and a short description of operational status and location.

- SSASY – Same Sex Attracted Southern Youth. This program is run by Inner South Community Health Service (ISCHS) – specifically for same sex attracted young women only
- YAK - The Family Planning Action Learning Centre runs this program.
- Minus 18 dance parties.

SSASY

This support group is currently in the redevelopment stages and looking for more members. It was previously been successful as a group for all people and has recently begun a new cycle of life catering specifically for same sex attracted females aged under 26. The group intends to offer group dynamic support and an open forum for young women to meet other individuals like themselves. SSASY is a free service and the only female specific service in the City of Port Phillip or surrounding area.

YAK

This group is run in the municipality of Melbourne. YAK is comprised of approximately 30-40 youth (on the books). They meet the first and third Friday of every month. The majority of these meetings are not event based although they do have event based meetings regularly. The majority of the youth utilising YAK are males although there are several females using the service.

YAK primarily delivers social support in a group therapy dynamic. Someone will present a problem and group participants will give their solutions, sometimes unhelpful and sometimes helpful, but everyone has the chance to be heard and contribute. One of the facilitators will then work through the dilemma with the group. YAK has a strong history and a successful reputation and is also a free service.

Minus 18 dance parties

Minus 18 hosts up to 10 events a year around Melbourne for SSAYP, including 6 dance parties. Dance parties provide a friendly safe environment for young people to dance and enjoy each other's company without fear of homophobia or discrimination. All dance parties are after-hours. Other events are also of a social nature.

Operational aspects of the programs

One of the common misconceptions about gay youth is that they are all the same 'type' and have the same issues. YAK facilitators have experienced a variety of issues presented through YAK and can generally identify a rough division within the group. The younger 12-18 year olds are often more concerned with 'coming out' or what their parents might think. The older group 19 – 25 year olds are often more concerned about sexual health, STDs, socialising, employment and careers. These two groups obviously aren't set in concrete and have a fair amount of overlap. This further highlights the necessity for more support groups. Just because an individual identifies as same sex attracted doesn't make them homogenous.

Most of the YAK participants don't go to Minus 18 because it is very much scoped for the one 'type' of SSAYP (this one type is the very dancing 'out there' young boy). As one of the facilitators mentioned:

“A lot of the youth at YAK aren't really into that type of stuff. They don't want to dance and get on the dance floor. They are more articulate and prefer to sit around and have a whinge about their life or politics. They aren't interested in going out dancing, especially with younger people.”

Another problem with Minus 18 parties is the fact that they are all at night when young people can't get out or might have to lie to their parents to get out of the house. This presents many problems. Some of the young people have attended both YAK and SSASY in the past. However, not many attend both at the moment as SSASY is currently rebuilding the group. With SSASY rebuilding, Minus 18 running on a three-monthly cycle and YAK within the municipality of Melbourne there are no SSAYP specific services in the City of Port Phillip at all. When SSASY does become operational again shortly, it will only cater for women. This is better than nothing and a pragmatic approach sees this as positive. Nevertheless, there is still a significant shortfall in service delivery for young men within Port Phillip.

Recommendations

Community youth services can provide an indispensable source of connectedness and support for many individuals experiencing isolation or ambiguity around their sexuality. Nevertheless, many Same Sex Attracted Young People (SSAYP) don't utilise these services.

One of the biggest deficits identified throughout the research was the fact that many youth service providers aren't aware that Minus 18, SSASY or YAK exist. Networking between these three programs and generalist youth services needs strengthening. Engaging secondary schools is also a key opportunity to encourage 'normalisation' of SSAYP in the school yard and ultimately in the wider community.

Council has a role to support community groups and foster strong SSAYP community networks

The following table identifies the most significant issues for SSAYP in the City of Port Phillip and ways forward to address them.

Summary of issues and opportunities for Same Sex Attracted Young People in the City of Port Phillip

Issue	Opportunity	Participants	Time period	Cost
1. Lack of a SSAYP social and support group for all people	1.1 Provide a safe place for discussion, socialisation and encourage peer support. A support group is considered a major way to address SSAYP issues and would provide an ideal platform for understanding, support and the creation of further initiatives. (More details below - see Note (a))	City of Port Phillip Youth Services Inner South Community Health Service (ISCHS) St Kilda Youth Services Inner South East Partnership in Community and Health (ISEPICH)	Medium	Medium
2. Low level of community organisation networking	2.1 Develop a network to support organisations working with SSAYP 2.2 Get SSAYP issues into mainstream health and community services via a SSAYP working group networking, education and forums.	City of Port Phillip Youth Services City Stonnington Community based SSAYP orgs. ISCHS ISEPICH	Medium	Low
3. Schools not consistently engaged	3.1 Build stronger and sustainable relationships between local secondary schools and SSAYP services (More details below – see Note (b))	City of Port Phillip Youth Services Secondary schools	Medium	Medium
4. Lack of dedicated SSAYP Youth Worker	4.1 State Government to fund worker to supplement local youth services and support SSAYP services across the region	City of Port Phillip ISEPICH	Long	High
5. Limited council support for SSAYP	5.1 Strengthen council practical and political support for the SSAYP community by providing internal training education and information.	City of Port Phillip ISEPICH	Medium	Low
6. SSAYP Report	6.1 Distribute Services for SSAYP report to mainstream agencies	City of Port Phillip and other agencies	Low	Low

Notes (Table 1)

(i) Ideally, a group would be operating within The City of Port Phillip with council and service providers support. This group could meet weekly or biweekly. Having an organised activity every second week has proven successful in the past. Non-activity weeks provide a greater opportunity for open dialogue. Sessions would be conducted with two facilitators, having one male and one female facilitator in each group is desirable. Having a facilitator that identifies as SSA or gay is essential but equally important is having a facilitator that isn't SSA or gay. Many SSAYP haven't experienced positive relationships with heterosexual individuals and facilitating group members' relationships can provide a strong platform for this to occur as the group provides a safe environment to start developing these skills. The facilitators would also provide modelling for all the youth. Modelling is an essential aspect of this type of program.

(ii) Having strong positive connections with the local secondary schools is highly desirable as this provides an opportunity to maintain a high level of engagement from the schools' young people and helps create and maintain a positive school culture. The majority of youth are going to hear about such programs through word of mouth and having a positive reputation with the local school is imperative to youth support groups' success. Holding functions on Saturdays, Sundays and after-hours on weeknights provides a greater opportunity for more young people to access these groups.

Forming a SSAYP social and support group would be a best-case scenario. This would help provide support for a range of young men and women. Increased communication between YAK, SSASY, Minus 18, other youth services and the City of Port Phillip would be a great start.

The opportunity to support our population of same sex attracted youth is something that can be done and will assist the health and well being of many young people.

References

Hillier, L., Turner, A., & Mitchell, A. (2005) *Writing Themselves in Again: 6 years on. The second national report on the sexuality, health & wellbeing of same sex attracted young people in Australia*, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS), La Trobe University, Melbourne.

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