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## Community Programs - Evaluating Benefits for LGBTQ Youth: A Program Evaluation of the PrideLEAD Program at Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook

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COMMUNITY PROGRAMS – EVALUATING BENEFITS FOR LGBTQ YOUTH:

A Program Evaluation of the PrideLEAD program at Youth Services of  
Glenview/Northbrook

A Thesis Presented to  
the Faculty of the University Honors Program  
Northeastern Illinois University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
Of the NEIU Honors Program  
For Graduation with Honors

Michael Bandy  
April 2019

HONORS SENIOR PROJECT  
ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL FORM

Michael Bandy

Community Programs – Evaluating Benefits for LGBTQ Youth:

A Program Evaluation of the PrideLEAD program at Youth Services of  
Glenview/Northbrook

This thesis has been reviewed by the faculty of the NEIU Honors Program and is found to be in good order in content, style, and mechanical accuracy. It is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the NEIU Honors Program and graduation with honors.



Prof. Dr Job Ngwe, Department of Social Work  
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4/16/19

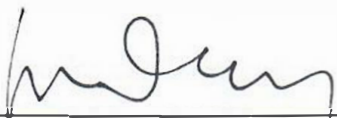
Date



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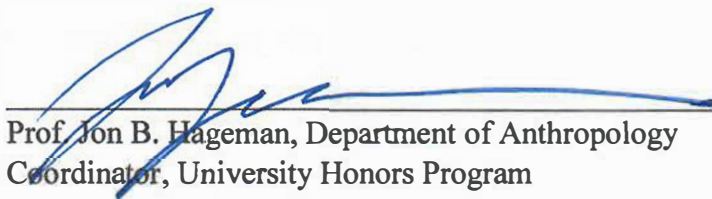
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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to determine how LGBTQ+ youth benefit from the series of programming created for them by Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook. This study specifically focused on the PrideLEAD group, which is made up of high school students who identify as LGBTQ+, who are there to learn leadership skills. This study focused on how the program impacts their self-esteem, their confidence, the way they view the world, the way they handle discrimination when they are faced with it, and how they view their own strengths and challenges as leaders.

The survey sought to answer three specific questions - (1) What types of discrimination have students faced at home, in school, etc., and what was done to correct the problem? (2) What positive effects does being a member of the PrideLEAD team have on their self-esteem? (3) What valuable skills have members gained from being on the PrideLEAD team that they can take into the world with them? Survey participants received a link to the online survey, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

The research conducted showed that LGBTQ+ youth in the PrideLEAD program gain self-esteem, confidence, leadership skills, social skills, and adaptability. They also showed that although the teens had heard discriminatory language and some of it was directed at them, the PrideLEAD group helped them develop the social skills and provided them with the support to be able to handle it. Feelings of worthlessness, depression, anxiety and suicidal ideations are relatively low, and in many cases even nonexistent, among members of the group.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are many issues that LGBTQ+ youth face in our society, including discrimination, bullying, non-acceptance from family and friends, isolation and suicide. According to the 2018 Youth Report provided by the Human Rights Campaign, LGBTQ+ youth sometimes face the most discrimination in their own homes and classrooms. The report states that 24% of LGBTQ+ youth can ‘definitely’ be themselves as an LGBTQ+ person at home (HRC, 2018). Only 26% of LGBTQ+ students said they always felt safe in school classrooms, and just 5% say that all their teachers and school staff are supportive of LGBTQ+ people (HRC, 2018). A staggering 67% of the population surveyed reported that they’ve heard family members make negative comments about LGBTQ+ people (HRC, 2018).

For LGBTQ+ youth of color, the problems are even more concerning and compounding. The study reported that only 11% of people of color surveyed felt that their ethnic backgrounds were regarded positively in the United States (HRC, 2018). Also, routine activities that many take for granted, such as using a public restroom, is a source of strain for some members of the LGBTQ+ community. Fifty-one percent of trans youth surveyed in the study reported that they can never use the restrooms or locker rooms in their schools that match their gender identities (HRC, 2018).

These issues of discrimination and rejection can lead to many problems for LGBTQ+ youth, and this discrimination is reflected in high rates of LGBTQ suicides. According to The Trevor Project’s fact sheet on their website entitled Facts About Suicide, LGB youth seriously contemplate suicide at almost three times the rate of heterosexual youth, and LGB youth are almost five times as likely to have attempted

suicide compared to heterosexual youth (2016). These statistics may seem daunting, but many LGBTQ+ youth report that if they have a gay-straight alliance group at their school, or a similarly-themed group in their community, it helps them feel less isolated, like their opinions matter, and helps them connect with like-minded individuals so that they develop positive social skills and become more active political members of society. The agency where I am doing my internship, Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook, has such a set of programs geared toward LGBTQ+ youth, and I will use my research to determine how well these programs are working.

According to the agency's website, Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook was founded in 1972 in Glenview, and in 1974 in Northbrook, "as the community's response to the needs of children" (2018). Both agencies were separate at the time, but since they shared the same mission, they merged in 1992. In 2009, a brand-new building was opened on East Lake Ave in Glenview which houses the facility. This building includes a gym, media room, library, kitchen, art room, game room, and several individual counseling spaces, which have since provided youth in the area with a place to be counseled, meet other children in group settings, get help with their homework, and have fun.

Within the last few years, the agency absorbed a separate agency specifically focused on LGBTQ+ youth programming and re-named it the Pride Youth program. This program has under its umbrella three different groups which have several subgroups within them. According to the agency's website, the PrideSOCIAL group offers both informal drop-in times as well as periodic events for LGBTQ+ youth to meet each other and build supportive relationships with peers and caring adults (2018), The PrideSUPPORT groups are peer support groups for LGBTQ+ middle school students and



transgender high school students, which are facilitated by a licensed social worker and provide a safe and confidential space to discuss important issues and support each other (2018). The PrideLEAD group provides youth leadership for all Pride programs. “LGBTQ+ high school student leaders apply for and commit to a year-long program in which they build valuable leadership skills for college, career, and beyond. Youth Leaders plan and lead social and service activities for their peers, as well as facilitate educational programming for other youth and adults about LGBTQ+ identities, experiences, and allyship.” (2018)

## PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to determine how LGBTQ+ youth benefit from the series of programming created for them by Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook, and how (if at all) they use those benefits in their everyday lives. This study specifically focused on the PrideLEAD group, which is made up of high schoolers who identify as LGBTQ+, who are there to learn leadership skills. Beyond the population, this study focused how the program at Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook impacted their self-esteem, their confidence, the way they viewed the world, the way they handled discrimination, and how they viewed their own strengths and challenges as leaders. I aimed to find out if the PrideLEAD group really does prepare these kids to be leaders, and in what ways the program might be improved.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions for this study are as follows: 1) How does Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook impact youth a) self-esteem, b) self-confidence, c) worldview, d) handling of discrimination, and e) challenges? 2) What brought the students to the PrideLEAD group? What were students hoping to get out of it? 3.) Since being in the group, what skills do students feel they have learned? 4) What has being in the group made students realize that they didn't know before they got here? 5) What is missing from PrideLEAD that students feel would benefit future members?

### HYPOTHESIS

I predicted that the research will show that LGBTQ youth's self-esteem and self-confidence are improved by participating in the PrideLEAD program at Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook, and that they benefit mostly positively from the programs created for them. I also predicted that the research will show that the program helps them with leadership skills, social skills, and adaptability that students will need when they graduate high school and go out into the world. I don't believe there are many negative impacts from the program to the youth.

### SIGNIFICANCE

This study is very important to me, not just as a researcher or social work student, but as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Growing up in a hetero-normative world can be very isolating for a child who does not identify with that community. During my youth, I often found that I didn't have a lot of places to go where I would be understood, where I might find like-minded individuals to hang out with, or even a place where I might have my skills recognized in a way that felt relevant to the struggles I face as a member of the

LGBTQ+ community. In fact, until I got to high school and joined the gay straight alliance club, affirming spaces such as these did not exist. Twenty years later, I feel that the situation is still similar for teens growing up in the LGBTQ+ community, and my goal as a social worker is to be that person for them that I didn't have when I was growing up.

This study is also important to my agency, Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook, and the teens in the PrideLEAD program. Through the findings from this survey, the agency can determine what is working about the PrideLEAD program, what the teens are getting out of it, and what they still need or still wish to see coming out of that group. This will allow them to tailor the group in a way that works best for most participants. The teens in the PrideLEAD group will benefit as well, because responding to the survey questions might help them realize that their opinions matter, that who they are matters, and that the PrideLEAD groups serve a function to help them see that and be their best selves, rather than just having a place to hang out twice a month.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review section is to (1) highlight statistics showing that LGBTQ youth struggle with discrimination from family and friends, especially in schools, (2) present findings from several studies about how gay/straight alliance groups in schools or in the community affect LGBTQ youth, and (3) discuss the policy and practice implications that may be necessary in order to help LGBTQ youth in the future.

### **Discrimination Against LGBTQ youth**

Although the environment for LGBTQ youth in schools has become generally more accepting in the last few years, this population still faces a lot of discrimination due to their

sexuality. According to an article that appeared in the publication *Youth & Society* entitled “Negative and Positive Factors Associated with the Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth.,” many LGBTQ youth are still facing discrimination based on their sexuality in the form of bullying, non-acceptance, and isolation (Higa, 2012).

This discrimination came from many different sources, including other kids in schools, people in church, as well as discrimination from the youth’s own families. Sixty-eight youth (50% male, 47% female, 3% transgender) were interviewed for the study, and reported positive effects on their well-being that came in the form of identity development, having access to a positive peer network, and being involved with the LGBTQ community (Higa, 2012). The result of this study suggests that having a network or supportive community around LGBTQ youth helps them gain a positive identity and helps them gain self-esteem, confidence, and leadership skills.

One well-known survey in the LGBTQ community that is conducted annually is the LGBTQ Youth Report, which is conducted by the Human Rights Campaign. Their 2018 report was comprised of data received by over 12,000 respondents ages 13-17 from all over the country, and the results surrounding discrimination were staggering. According to the survey, only 26% of students said that they always feel safe in their school classrooms, and just 5% say all of their teachers and school staff are supportive of LGBTQ people (HRC, 2018). Sixty-seven percent of respondents reported that they have heard family members make negative comments about LGBTQ people, and LGBTQ youth of color and transgender teenagers have a particularly difficult time (HRC, 2018). Only 11% of youth of color respondents believed that their racial or ethnic makeup is regarded

positively in this country, and over 50% of trans and gender expansive youth said that they can never use the school restrooms that align with their gender identity (HRC, 2018).

### **Impacts of Discrimination**

Dealing with discrimination daily is very difficult for LGBTQ youth, and the very same study done by the Human Rights Campaign shows the impact of this discrimination. According to the 2018 survey, 77% of LGBTQ teenagers reported feeling depressed or down during the past week, and more than 70% had feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness within the past week (HRC, 2018). These feelings are just some factors that influence how LGBTQ youth are the most at-risk population for self-harm and suicide. In fact, LGBTQ youth contemplate suicide at almost 3 times the rate of heterosexual youth, and they are almost five times as likely to have attempted suicide, compared to heterosexual youth (CDC, 2016). Another national study found that 40% of transgender adults reported having made at least one suicide attempt, and 92% of them reported having done so before the age of 25 (James, 2016).

These statistics prove that something must be done in order to help LGBTQ youth face less discrimination in society. In response to these societal factors, it is important to explore interventions that can help them develop self-esteem, feel true acceptance, and perhaps develop life skills that will help them become positive role models as well as productive members of society. Many studies show that gay straight alliances or other community-based LGBTQ groups, as well as involvement within the LGBTQ community, can potentially have a positive impact on students' self-esteem and lessen the burdens of discrimination and inequality.

### **What About LGBTQ Groups?**

Gay straight alliances (or GSAs) as well as community-based groups such as drop in centers or LGBTQ-themed groups exist for support, socializing, information gathering, resource provision, and agency. The prevalence of these groups has been on the rise in recent years, and many studies have been done which show that being a member of a gay straight alliance in school or attending a community-based group leaning towards LGBTQ issues can give LGBTQ youth a sense of belonging and agency. One study involving 295 youth across 33 GSAs in the state of Massachusetts (69 % LGBTQ, 68 % cisgender female, 68 % white) found that youth, specifically LGBTQ youth, who were able to participate in GSAs had a greater sense of agency (Poteat, 2016).

Studies show that membership in a group such as a GSA promotes social inclusion and justice for LGBTQ youth, however, more studies must be completed to determine how well those who have been in these groups fare when they leave school. According to an article which appeared in the publication *Educational Researcher* entitled “Gay-Straight Alliances as Settings for Youth Inclusion and Development: Future Conceptual and Methodological Directions for Research on These and Other Student Groups in Schools.,” more data must be collected in the short and long-term to determine how well GSAs help LGBTQ youth in the future in terms of promoting resilience and addressing broader social issues (Poteat, 2017).

Even though more data on this topic is needed, belonging to a group such as this can promote leadership skills. These studies directly relate to programming at my current agency, Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook. Their PrideLEAD program focuses on teenaged LGBTQ students in high schools and teaches them how to facilitate meetings, plan events, and educate the public around LGBTQ issues, which is why I wanted to focus

my study on this program. PrideLEAD can perhaps prepare youth for advocacy or education later in life. There are not a lot of groups in schools that exist for this specific purpose, and the studies I have read show that these types of groups are beneficial for LGBTQ youth long after they graduate from high school.

### **Policy and Practice Implications**

Research that has been done in the area of LGBTQ youth in schools shows that new policies and interventions must be created to better serve this population. One study which appeared in the publication *Professional School Counseling* entitled “Introduction to the Special Issue: School Counselors Transforming Schools for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Students” focused on how school counselors and other educational leaders can make things easier for LGBTQ students. The article itself highlighted six different trainings that school leaders can go through to make school a more accepting and affirming place for LGBTQ students. The author of the article stated, “We look forward to a time when LGBTQ students enter the school building with no questions about their safety, role, or value” (Singh, 2017). Such curriculum for school leaders is a necessary policy change going forward, especially if the goal is to help LGBTQ students feel more accepted at school, which may help them learn better.

Another important factor to focus on when it comes to policy is how policies surrounding the LGBTQ community (or rather, the lack of policies) can affect mental health. An article that appeared in the *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* entitled “Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Youth,” explores why LGBTQ youth are still at a high risk for compromised mental health even though they come out at younger ages, and public support for them is higher than ever. Policy changes

such as the legalization of gay marriage, or trans-positive bathroom laws, just to name a couple, mean that things may be getting better legally for LGBTQ youth, although this may change with our current administration. However, if these rights are attained, LGBTQ mental health issues may improve as the culture improves, but more research is needed to determine this (Russell, 2016). Only time and changes in administration and government will tell how much better policies will become in favor of the LGBTQ community, and how that will affect our mental health.

Working with LGBTQ youth can be very challenging, especially for those who are not members of the community and may not have firsthand knowledge or experience with discrimination based on their sexuality. Though these youth face many challenges, the studies presented here show that membership in a GSA, or a community-based LGBTQ group, or even involvement in the LGBTQ community may provide LGBTQ youth with a sense of self-esteem, self-worth, leadership and advocacy skills, and a sense of agency that may very well last them the rest of their lives.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Sample**

The sample for this study will be high-school students from several different high schools in the Glenview/Northbrook area who participate in the PrideLEAD program at Youth Services of Glenview Northbrook. The PrideLEAD program is under the Pride Youth umbrella of programming offered by the agency and consists of 15-20 students who



use the program to develop leadership and facilitation skills, to educate the community about the issues LGBTQ teens face, and as a safe space to express their identities and make new friends. No recruitment for this study is necessary because I am an intern in the PrideLEAD program, and I provided the students with a link to take the survey online and participation was voluntary.

This survey will ask the students to talk about discrimination that they've experienced, and how the PrideLEAD program has helped them navigate it. The group is made up entirely of teenagers who identify as LGBTQ, and as such, research shows they are more prone to discrimination from their peers. They are also more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Because of this, the group is in the best possible position to answer questions about discrimination they've experienced because it's very likely that they have experienced such things. As the researcher, I must remember that the study may also be triggering for some members of the group. Discrimination and isolation are difficult topics to talk about and should any of the survey respondents have any issues with any of the questions, licensed counselors will be available through the practicum agency that they can consult with.

### **Design of Study**

This study will employ a mixed quantitative and qualitative online survey research design. The study will skew heavily qualitative, because most of the questions will be essay style and ask the respondents to relay experiences of discrimination. However, some quantitative data will also be collected, such as age and the high school that each respondent attends. The collection of the data will show how much the quantitative information

collected will play a role in the results, but again, most of this program evaluation will be in a qualitative manner. The survey questions will seek to answer three specific questions - (1) What types of discrimination have students faced at home, in school, etc., and what was done to correct the problem? (2) What positive effects does being a member of the PrideLEAD team have on students' self-esteem? (3) What valuable skills have members gained from being on the PrideLEAD team that they can take into the world with them? Respondents will be asked questions regarding the discrimination they've experienced before attending the PrideLEAD program, personal feelings of isolation, struggles with anxiety and depression, how being a member of the PrideLEAD program has improved or not improved those struggles, and skills gained from participation in the program will be assessed.

### **Intervention**

The intervention or independent variable for this study will be the PrideLEAD program, which teaches students about leadership and facilitation skills and provides them a safe space to express their identities, which is something they might not get outside of the program. The dependent variable in this study is the attitudes and behaviors of the students who attend the program, and how those attitudes and behaviors (anxiety, depression, isolation, suicidal ideation, etc.) change or improve as a result of being a member of the PrideLEAD program.

### **Measures**

The survey will include questions that I have developed and will include demographic information such as age, high school attended, gender and sexual orientation, discrimination they have experienced, impacts of said discrimination (which will include

anxiety, depression, etc.), and how the PrideLEAD program has affected their attitudes and how they feel about themselves

Demographic information: Demographic information for this study will include age (should be anywhere from 15-18), gender (male, female, and other, with “other” possibly being broken down as a write in portion for the student to describe their gender expression), high school they attend (should be Glenbrook North, Glenbrook South, or Northbrook High School), and sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other, with “other” being a write-in option for the words the students use individually to describe their sexual orientation).

Discrimination: This portion of the study will consist of essay questions that will ask the respondent to relay issues of discrimination they’ve faced or heard about, whether this occurred at home, in school, their places of employment, or out in the world. The idea is to get a sense of what discrimination LGBTQ teenagers still face today, which will help me get a sense of whether their situation really has improved over time.

Impacts of Discrimination: This portion of the study will look at how discrimination has impacted the survey respondents. I want to find out if any of them have experienced anxiety, depression or suicidal ideation as a result of discrimination they may have experienced. I understand that some of these questions may be triggering for some of the survey respondents, and I will ensure that they feel supported by licensed counselors available through the practicum agency, should they need those services.

PrideLEAD: The final portion of this qualitative survey will ask the respondents how being in the PrideLEAD program has affected their self-esteem, confidence, and the way that they approach situations of discrimination since becoming a member of the

program. I'd also like to know what skills each of the respondents feels they have gained from being a part of the program, and how they will use those skills after they graduate high school and go on to college or out into the working world.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

After approval was received from the supervisors of the program at the agency, a link to an online survey was shared with all members of the PrideLEAD program through the group's online messaging service, where everyone was able to find the link easily and quickly respond to the survey. The respondents first read and signed the informed consent form included with the survey and provided an electronic signature (this informed consent form assured confidentiality in this survey, as well as anonymity). Respondents were then asked to complete all the survey questions to obtain demographic information, as well as the essay questions regarding discrimination, impacts of discrimination, and how the PrideLEAD program has helped them, as stated above. The survey took about half an hour to complete.

### **Data Analysis and Expected Findings**

Student responses to the survey questions were read, analyzed, and reported in answer to the research questions to test the hypotheses noted here. Graphs depicted the demographic information for those who responded to the survey, and the qualitative data were analyzed to determine how the PrideLEAD program has helped each student. I predicted that my research will show that LGBTQ+ youth in the PrideLEAD program gain self-esteem, confidence, leadership skills, social skills, and adaptability. The results showed that feelings of worthlessness, depression, anxiety and suicidal ideations are relatively low among members of the group.

## RESULTS

Demographic information regarding the teens in the PrideLEAD group was collected in order to obtain quantitative data. One of the questions asked was how each participant would describe their gender identity. Half of the survey respondents identified themselves as cisgender, meaning that their gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. Thirty-seven-and-a-half percent of survey respondents described their gender identity as nonbinary or genderqueer, which are catch-all terms for gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine and are outside the gender binary. Twelve-and-a-half percent of survey respondents identified as transgender, meaning that their gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Another question on the survey asked respondents to describe their sexual orientation. Thirty-seven-and-a-half percent of survey respondents identified themselves as gay or lesbian, meaning that they were sexually attracted to members of the same sex. Twenty-five percent of survey respondents identified themselves as bisexual, meaning that they were attracted to both males and females, and one of the respondents indicated that they were attracted to “two or more genders,” indicating an attraction to those outside of the gender binary. Twelve-and-a-half percent of survey respondents identified as asexual, meaning that they have no sexual attractions or desires. Twelve-and-a-half percent of survey respondents identified as pansexual, which means that they are not limited in their sexual attractions in regards to sex, gender, or gender identity. Twelve-and-a-half percent of survey respondents identified as queer. The definition of the word “queer” in terms of sexuality has been hotly debated, but a basic understanding is that

queer means the person is non-heterosexual and may be sexually attracted to many different genders.

Figure 1 shows the age distribution of the survey participants. As the graph shows, 50% of the survey participants are 17 years old, while 16 and 18-year-olds made up 25% each of the distribution.

**Figure 1: Age Distribution of Survey Participants**

What is your age?

8 responses

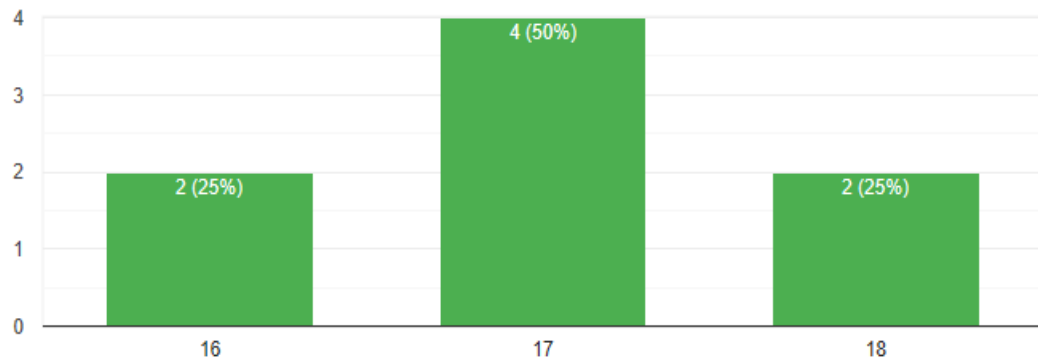


Figure 2 shows how long each of the survey participants has been a member of the PrideLEAD program. One participant chose to answer in the form of a sentence but indicated that they were currently a junior in high school and had been a member since they were a freshman, making this their third year in the program. The distribution was as follows: 37.5% of respondents had been in the program for one year, and the same amount had been in the program for three years. 25% of survey respondents have been a member of PrideLEAD for the past two years.

## Figure 2: Length of Membership in PrideLEAD

How long have you been in the PrideLEAD program at Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook?

8 responses

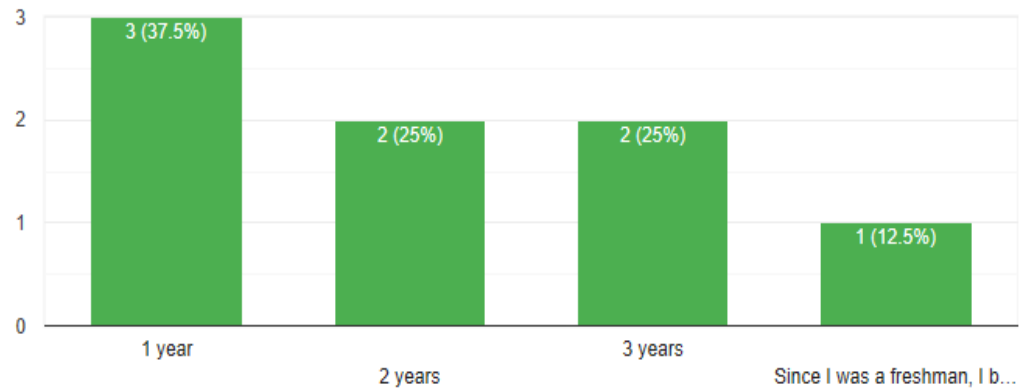


Figure 3 provides information about whether or not the survey participants were members of other LGBTQ+ centered programming, either at Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook (there are groups called SWAG and Kinship that cater to this age range at the agency), or any GSAs or school support groups. As shown by the pie chart, 75% of survey respondents are members of such groups outside of PrideLEAD, while 25% were not.

### Figure 3: Involvement in other LGBTQ+ Centered Groups

Are you involved in a GSA or school support group or any other LGBTQ+ centered programming, at Youth Services (SWAG, Kinship, etc.) or otherwise?

8 responses

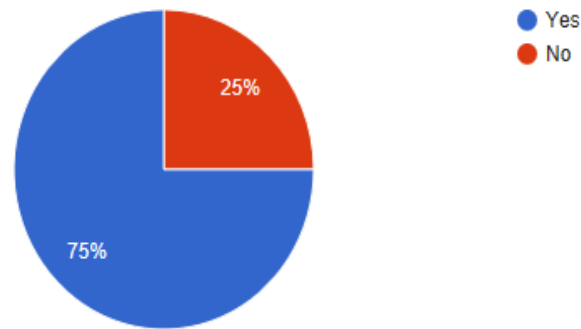


Figure 4 shows how survey respondents answered the question of whether they had heard negative remarks about LGBTQ+ people from adults or from their peers. One hundred percent of survey respondents reported that they had heard such remarks. This staggering number indicates an urgent need for adults to be more mindful of the language we use, and to be more mindful of our attitudes toward that LGBTQ+ community. Figure



#### 4: Prevalence of Negative Remarks Towards the LGBTQ+ Community

Have you ever heard negative remarks about LGBTQ+ people from adults or from your peers?

8 responses

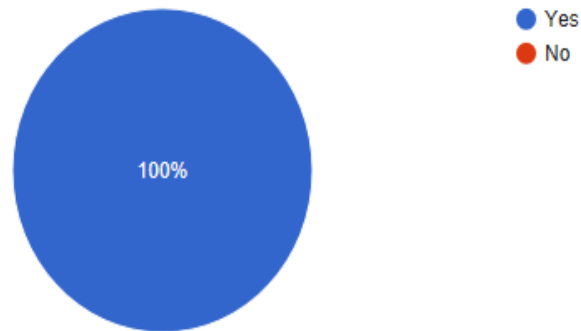
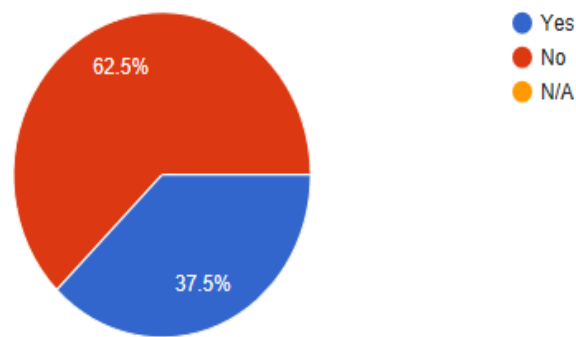


Figure 5 depicts the results of the question of whether these negative remarks had ever been directed at any of the survey respondents. Sixty-two-and-a-half percent of survey respondents reported that these remarks had not been directed at them, while 37.5% said that the remarks had been directed at them. This result is encouraging for this group, but the idea that any teenager would have to endure discriminating remarks from adults or from their peers at all, based on their sexual or gender identity, is a problem.

### Figure 5: Have Negative Remarks Been Directed At You?

If the answer to the above question is yes - Have any of these remarks been directed at you?

8 responses



A follow up question on the survey asked respondents who had had discriminating remarks directed at them to talk about what they did in order to feel better in those situations. With respect to anonymity and privacy, the paraphrasing of their answers spoke volumes about how PrideLEAD has helped the survey respondents handle these situations. One participant said that being in the group helped them realize that it is not their responsibility to correct every ignorant person in the world, but that sometimes they get frustrated and say harsh things back. Another respondent stated that they way they feel better in those situations is to stand up for themselves and to seek the comfort of friends – things they learned how to do from the support of being in PrideLEAD. Another respondent said that they used to respond to discriminating remarks with violence, but that since joining PrideLEAD, they have learned to ignore most remarks that they hear because they now have a solid support system.

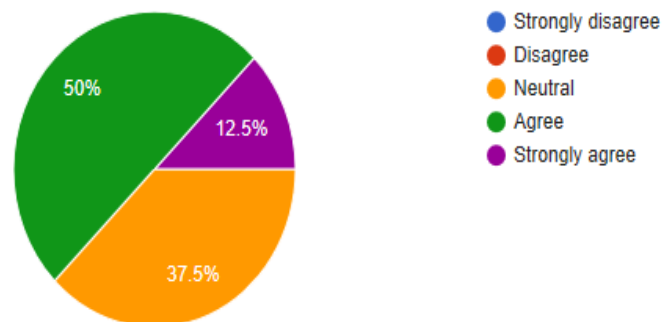
Figure 6 explored the question of whether survey respondents felt comfortable expressing their sexual orientation or gender identities at school. Surprisingly, even in a

climate where teens hear negative remarks from adults on a regular basis, the results skewed positively here. Fifty percent of respondents agreed that they felt comfortable expressing their sexual orientation/gender identity at school, 37.5% were neutral on the statement, and 12.5% strongly agreed with the statement. These results are very encouraging and did well to prove my hypothesis that being a member of a group such as PrideLEAD helps students feel more comfortable expressing themselves and being honest about who they are, even in the face of discrimination.

**Figure 6: Level of Comfort Expressing Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity at School**

I always feel safe expressing my sexual orientation/gender identity at school.

8 responses



A follow up to this question asked survey respondents to describe the kinds of experiences they have had at school related to their sexual orientation/gender identity that have made them uncomfortable. A few respondents indicated that they experienced microaggressions related to LGBTQ+ people that, while they may not have been directed at them personally, still were generally derogatory. These same few stated that they experienced restroom discrimination, and were unable to use the restroom that more closely aligned with their gender identity without backlash from other students or from school administrators. One respondent stated that they were uncomfortable with people at

school trying to force their opinions onto them, and discounting how hurtful slurs are, and that has been difficult for them to deal with.

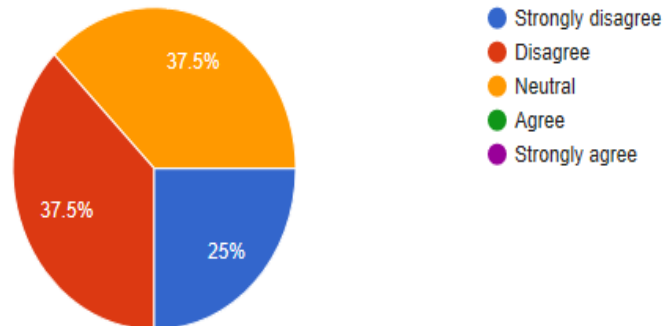
One respondent said that they dropped out of high school and cited the stress and mental health issues that they experienced in school that led them to that decision. They described situations where teachers would call them by their birth name instead of their preferred name, being forced to use the locker room that didn't align with their gender identity, and that their pronouns were simply ignored by most people, or just not respected. These are the types of experiences that school administrators need to hear about and do something about in order to make schools a safer place for LGBTQ+ youth.

Figure 7 depicts the results of the statement “If I have a negative experience at school based on my sexual orientation/gender identity, I am confident it will be properly addressed by school administrators.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, the results skewed mostly negative here. Thirty-seven-and-a-half percent of survey respondents disagreed with this statement, and the same percentage felt neutral about it. 25% of survey respondents strongly disagreed with this statement. Just as the national school climate survey that GLSEN conducted showed, school administrators and other staff are not doing enough to handle the discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ students, and even the results of this small-scale survey agree with that sentiment. More needs to be done at the school level to ensure the safety of LGBTQ+ students.

### Figure 7: Confidence in School Administrators Properly Addressing Discrimination

If I have a negative experience at school based on my sexual orientation/gender identity, I am confident that it will be properly addressed by school administrators.

8 responses



The last few questions on the survey were qualitative in nature and focused specifically on the PrideLEAD program and survey participants' experiences in it. One such question asked what positive impact being a member of PrideLEAD had on survey respondents. This was one question that all eight survey respondents chose to answer, and what they had to say showed the importance of groups such as PrideLEAD for LGBTQ+ youth. Survey respondents indicated that the positive impacts PrideLEAD had on them were fostering a sense of community, friendship and support, as well as developing leadership skills and helping them to feel more confident in their sexual orientation and gender identity. The student that indicated they had dropped out of high school stated that PrideLEAD has made them a stronger and confident person and that when they felt like a failure for dropping out, the group rekindled their dreams. They stated that being a member of PrideLEAD makes them feel "wanted, appreciated, excited and useful," and that the group is like a family to them.

Another question asked respondents to identify if being a member of PrideLEAD helped them handle negative experiences as an LGBTQ identified person, and asked for examples of how the group helped. Survey respondents stated that the group helped them by providing them with information, being a source of support and helping them develop the confidence to speak up in situations where they feel discriminated against. One respondent stated that being a member of PrideLEAD has helped them learn more effective ways of communicating in general, but especially in communicating with difficult people. Another respondent stated that PrideLEAD has helped them realize that they don't need to feel ashamed for being who they are, and that there are people who will advocate for them and support them no matter what.

The final question on the survey asked respondents to identify other ways that they would connect with the LGBTQ community if there were no PrideLEAD group, and how important the connection of the group was to each of them. Some respondents said that if there were no PrideLEAD group, they would try to connect with other groups at school based on their LGBTQ identity or on other interests that they have. Some respondents said that they wouldn't connect with the community in any other way if this group didn't exist, mostly because it would be difficult for them to be able to find the opportunity to do so. One respondent said that if there were no PrideLEAD, they would start their own similar group and advocate for LGBTQ youth on their own, because being a member of PrideLEAD has given them the tools to do that.

## LIMITATIONS

One limitation that I faced while conducting this research was a low rate of return on the survey. There are 18 students total in the PrideLEAD group, and only 8 participated in the survey despite a few separate reminders to participate. I have learned while conducting this research that, although teenagers are very good at adapting to new technologies and very good at expressing their opinions (at least among the teenagers in the PrideLEAD group), often they will not make surveys a priority, as many adults also do not. Also, discussing experiences involving discrimination can be very difficult for some people, and this may have factored into the reason some of the participants declined to participate, which was also a limitation.

Another limitation I faced while conducting this research had to do with gender and sexual orientation; specifically, the different types of gender identities and sexual orientations expressed by the teens who filled out the survey. The idea of gender and sexuality and the definitions of what they are, as well as the acceptable terminologies for the many different types of gender, are constantly changing and while I am very supportive and eager to learn more about these changes, as a researcher, the many different gender identities proved difficult to code in terms of data. I found myself wanting to lump some of them together (such as genderqueer, nonbinary, and trans), but they're very different from each other, and I had to determine how best to code them for the purpose of my research class.

Even though this work proved challenging, as adults it is extremely important to acknowledge and respect the many different gender identities and be respectful in conversations, such as using correct pronouns, not asking invasive questions, etc. Even

though they may not want to admit it, teenagers look to adults to be the role models of society and seek us out for advice and counsel, and it's important that we are doing all we can to learn about who they are, advocate for them, and respect who they are as people. The limitations in coding these identities is a reminder of this responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

The PrideLEAD program at Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook provides teens with a safe space to be who they are and helps them develop leadership skills as well as life skills in dealing with a world that often discriminates against them. The research I have referenced here shows that when LGBTQ youth have a group, such as a GSA or other type of support group related to their sexual or gender identity, they are less likely to develop symptoms of depression, anxiety, feelings of isolation, and suicidal ideations. Having a group such as PrideLEAD may not change the ideas of some ignorant people in the world, but it provides its members with a sense of belonging and community. Also, the things they learn in this group help them grow into functioning, productive and perhaps most importantly, advocacy-minded members of society when they become adults.

Many teens who identify as LGBTQ are still experiencing discrimination at school, in their workplaces, and among their peer groups. Studies other than mine have shown that when it comes to schools, administrators are not doing enough to ensure that this discrimination doesn't happen, and in many cases they are often complicit in it. Teenagers who identify as LGBTQ have to listen to discriminating language, they are often unable to use the restroom or locker room that most closely aligns with their gender identity, and they are often subject to rude and invasive questioning by heterosexual peers about their identity. Those are the best situations some of these teens can hope for; in the most extreme



cases, these teens are subject to physical assault and some have even been killed. Groups such as PrideLEAD are important for LGBTQ teens to maintain their sense of identity and help them navigate a heteronormative world. The PrideLEAD group at Youth Services of Glenview/Northbrook is fulfilling their mission of providing a safe, affirming and welcoming space for LGBTQ youth to be exactly who they are.

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