



ISSUES - Home 3 -  
-suicide

\$1.75

★★★★★

May 25 1997

MAY 25 1997

BOSTON SUNDAY HERALD, MAY 25, 1997

SUNDAY SPOTLIGHT

# Gay teen suicide stat refuted

## Little proof found to support high rates

By DELIA M. RIOS  
Newhouse News Service

WASHINGTON — It's a "statistic" that's been repeated innumerable times: A gay teenager is some three times as likely to attempt suicide as a heterosexual teenager.

The trouble is, there's no evidence that it's true.

That was the conclusion — back in 1994 — of the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institute of Mental Health, the American Psychological Association, the American Association of Suicidology, and gay advocacy groups, among others.

Joyce Hunter, the immediate past president of the National Lesbian and Gay Health Association, participated in that 1994 meeting. "What we're saying is that we don't know" whether there's a link between sexuality and suicide, she said.

Yet the stunningly high number of suicide attempts represented by the "two to three times more likely" figure — along with an unsubstantiated, companion "statistic" that gays and lesbians may account for 30 percent of

teen suicides — have shaped public perceptions of gay teens for nearly a decade.

They are portrayed as emotionally vulnerable victims of an oppressive culture who require intervention. But Hunter agrees with mental-health researchers that most gay and lesbian teens, like teens overall, are emotionally resilient people who "go on to develop a positive sense of self and who go on with their lives."

Gay advocates and critics, as well as the national press,

have cited the suicide link so often that it has become conventional wisdom with the power to influence public policy. Gov. William F. Weld, for instance, cited this suicide "statistic" as a driving force behind his state's creation of a Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth.

Overall, there are some 5,000 adolescent suicides in the United States every year. No one knows how many may be gay or bisexual.

Peter Muehrer, chief of the Youth Mental Health pro-

gram in the Prevention and Behavioral Medicine Research branch of the National Institute of Mental Health, has evaluated the studies most often cited to support a link between sexual orientation and suicide. He concluded that the research is "limited in both quantity and quality."

The faulty figures so often cited come from a 1989 report by Paul Gibson, a licensed clinical social worker in San Francisco. Gibson said his report was not a research

study, but rather a review of existing research. He used the "two to three times more likely" figure to estimate that 30 percent of completed teen suicides are by gays.

Muehrer, having reviewed the major studies Gibson cites, wrote that "there is no scientific evidence to support this figure."

No one is discounting that some gay teens experience emotional distress or attempt or commit suicide. Clinton W. Anderson, of the American Psychological Association, said the lack of "good science" shouldn't be an excuse for not getting help for teens who need it. ■