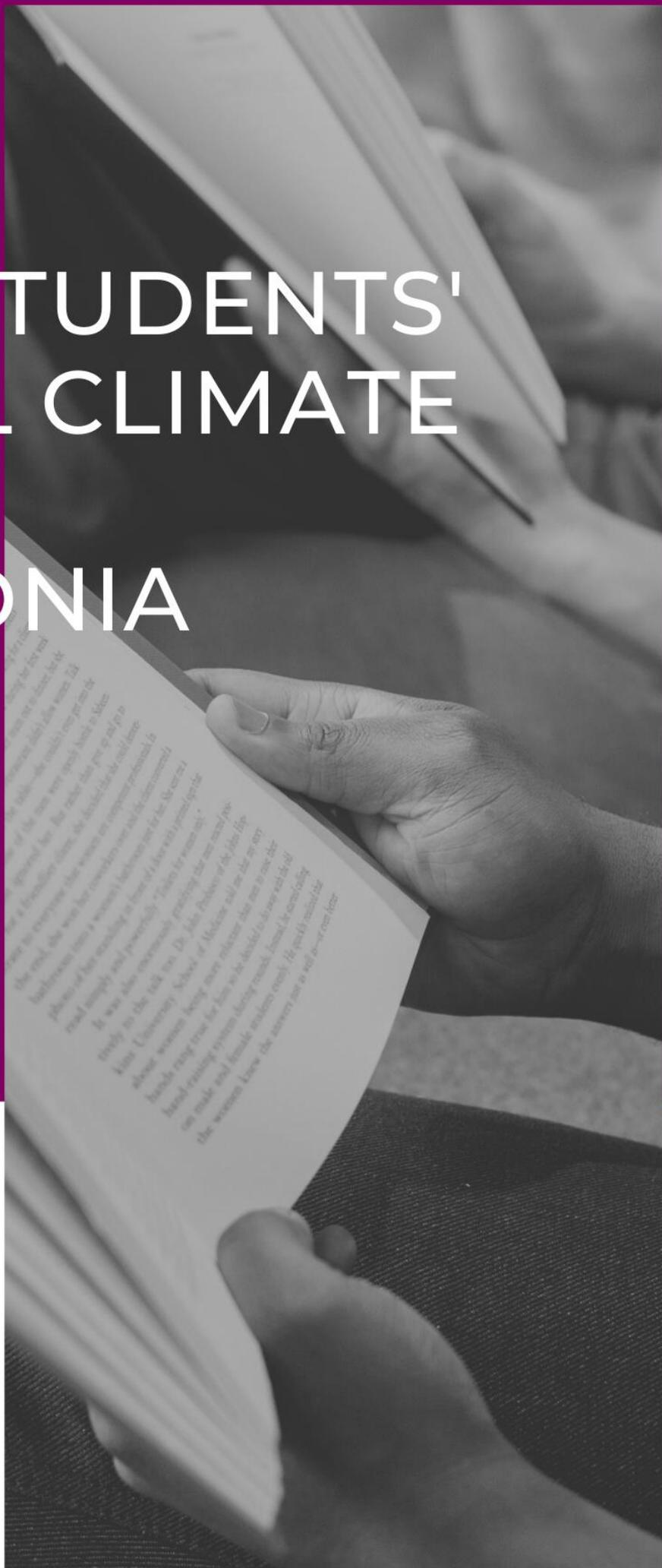


LGBT+ STUDENTS' SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY OF ESTONIA 2018



ESTONIAN
LGBT
ASSOCIATION

We thank the students who were willing to share their experiences.

*We thank the donors who supported the publication of the first
LGBT+ Students' School Climate Survey of Estonia.*

LGBT+ Students' School Climate Survey of Estonia 2018

Year: 2018

Conducted by Estonian LGBT Association

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CONDUCTING THE SURVEY

Background and aim of the survey

There is not much research on the life of LGBT+ people in Estonia. There are several public opinion surveys¹ on the attitudes towards the LGBT+ community, but these do not offer a voice to the community itself. There is also the paper² published by the Commissioner on Equal Treatment, but this does not clearly reflect the issues young people and students are facing. At the same time, while studies on school bullying do exist, they do not address the concerns of LGBT+ students.

Yet it is known from the experience of organizations working with young people and the community that LGBT+ students experience bullying precisely due to their identity, and that belonging to or being perceived as belonging to the LGBT+ community can be the reason of bullying for any student.

In order to address the issue of bullying we must recognise the reason for it. The aim of the first LGBT+ students' school climate survey of Estonia is to provide information to those working in the field of education about how LGBT+ students feel at school, which hardships they face, and what they need from the schools and their school staff.

The survey was conducted by the Estonian LGBT Association in cooperation with the US-based GLSEN who have extensive experience in the field of LGBT+ and education, including research.

The sample

The questionnaire was open between July and September 2018. It was promoted on the Facebook and Instagram pages of the Estonian LGBT Association. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. The questions concerned the school year 2017/2018. Respondents had to be at least 13 years old, they had to have been in middle or high school during the 2017/2018 school year, and they had to identify as members of the LGBT+ community. The questions asked about their experiences with prejudice, safety, bullying, the overall sense of belonging at school, academic achievements, participation in school activities, class contents, and the existence and effect of support systems.

A total of 561 LGBT+ students aged 13-21 responded to the questionnaire. Most were female (72%), a third identified as gay or lesbian (34%), and most were aged 15-18. Respondents represented

¹ [Public opinion surveys](#) on LGBT+ topics by the Estonian Human Rights Center.

² "The Everyday Life and Strategic Choices of LGBTQ people in Estonian Society" („[LGBTQ inimeste igapäevane toimetulek ja strateegilised valikud Eesti ühiskonnas](#)"). In Estonian.

students from middle and high school, from schools of different sizes, and from each county of Estonia. It is worth noting that in this sample, 1% of respondents equals 5,6 students.

SURVEY SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The results of the survey draw attention to several widespread issues. The negative attitude towards LGBT+ people and topics significantly affects LGBT+ students, but it may also affect other young people. As long as LGBT+ identities are associated with something bad, it is possible for any young person to become the victim of related violence, regardless of their affiliation with this community.

In addition, an incorrect understanding of sexuality and gender may cause issues for LGBT+ and other youth in recognizing their own identity, understanding their feelings and preferences, and handling insecurities, which may in turn lead to (sexual) risk behaviour, stress, depression, or suicide.

The following summaries of the most important finds of the survey are therefore important for the entire school family to keep in mind.

- The Estonian school is an unsafe and remarkably violent environment for LGBT+ students due to their identity. The LGBT+ students who took part in the survey felt unsafe in their school primarily due to their sexual orientation (39%) and gender expression (28%). In addition, 68% of LGBT+ students noted that in the last school year they had experienced mental violence precisely due to their sexual orientation, gender, or gender expression. In the last school year, at least a fifth of LGBT+ students had experienced physical violence and a third had experienced sexual harassment. The high numbers indicate that in order to solve the hate and violence experienced by LGBT+ students, it is not enough to only implement general anti-bullying measures. Instead, an approach specific to LGBT+ issues is necessary.
- The academic life of LGBT+ students is fragmentary. For example, those LGBT+ students who experienced more bullying than average due to their gender expression, were also three times more likely to be absent from school (38% vs 13%). 21% of LGBT+ students had been absent from school on at least one school day in the last month, because they felt that the school, or the way to or from school was not safe. Only 43% of respondents did not avoid any rooms or classes in school due to it being uncomfortable or unsafe. In addition, 77% of LGBT+ students replied that schoolmates had intentionally excluded them from activities. A fragmentary path of education affects the quality of the received education and infringes on the child's right to education. It can also negatively affect the young person's motivation to continue their education and thus also their success in the job market.

- The schools do not provide safe conditions for the basic needs of all students, as LGBT+ students largely avoided bathrooms (19%) and the cafeteria (18%) due to feeling uncomfortable or unsafe. Therefore, the student may be in a situation where they are unable to focus on studying, because they have to find other ways to satisfy their basic needs (e.g. visit the bathroom or the cafeteria during class) or not satisfy their basic needs (if they are unable to eat or go to the bathroom).
- Feeling uncomfortable or unsafe mostly caused LGBT+ students to avoid the rooms which are connected to one's gender identity, like physical education classes (31%), changing rooms (31%), and bathrooms (19%). Gender and its varieties may be harder to grasp than sexuality, which is why there is more misinformation and hostility related to gender and gender identity that causes problems for LGBT+ students with different gender identities. This can also negatively affect one's academic success, as the student may have to spend time and energy on finding alternative options, miss classes, or get notes from teachers, e.g. for not having appropriate clothes for physical education class.
- In addition to violence, hostile language can also make the school environment unsafe. For example, 60% of LGBT+ students noted that they had heard other students make homophobic remarks, such as "that's so gay", "dyke" (Estonian "lesbar"), or "fag" (Estonian "pede"), very often or often. Other students have the chance to intervene when they hear homophobic remarks. Still, only 2% of respondents noted that other students always intervened, and 55% replied that their schoolmates never intervened. Hostile expressions affect the students whom the remarks are about, as well as those who hear them. On the one hand, this shapes the latter's understanding of LGBT+ students, while on the other hand, it is known that witnessing bullying also negatively affects the bystanders.
- It is not only the words and actions of other students that create an unsafe and hostile school environment as teachers also play a role. 57% of LGBT+ students responded that they had heard homophobic remarks from teachers and other school staff. Many school employees also do not interfere when they hear students make homophobic remarks. 61% of respondents noted that school staff who heard the remarks never interfered and only 2% said that they always interfered. When a large number of school staff use hostile language and never interfere in hostile situations, this behaviour is normalised among students as well. The school staff are a role model for the entire school.
- The survey also revealed certain attitudes towards gender norms. 48% of LGBT+ students noted that they had heard remarks in school about someone's gender expression very often

or often. More remarks had been heard about those who were not “masculine” enough than about those not “feminine” enough. This may indicate that normative gender expression is considered more important for those who are or are perceived to be male, than for those who are or are perceived to be female. It also appears that school staff interfere less in cases of negative remarks about gender expression (never 72%) than in cases of homophobic remarks (never 61%), because they may be less noticeable or intelligible and they may be normalised in society at large.

- When LGBT+ students experience violence at school, they mostly do not wish to notify anyone. Only 33% of LGBT+ students who had experienced violence, reported the incident to a school staff member; only 12% had always or mostly reported. Mainly the students did not want to report because they did not think the school staff member would do anything (51%), or the students did not want their LGBT+ identity to be known in school or in their family (44%). The replies of the students demonstrate that many of them do not trust either their school staff or their families even in situations in which someone should be helping and supporting them. As family and school are the two main support networks for young people, this effectively leaves them without any emotional support as well as without adult help in solving problems.
- According to the latest public opinion survey on LGBT topics³, the attitudes towards LGBT+ people are significantly more negative among the Russian-speaking population of Estonia than they are among the Estonian-speaking population, which may mean that Russian-language schools are also more unsafe for LGBT+ students. The results of the school climate study did, indeed, show that there are remarkable differences in the attitudes of school staff. Namely, LGBT+ students in Russian-language schools were more likely to encounter negative remarks about the students’ gender expression (72% vs 28%), negative class content on LGBT+ topics (32% vs 16%), and the students also had fewer supportive school staff members (46% vs 16%).
- Information and role models are also absent in teaching. 60% of respondents said that they either had not encountered LGBT+ topics at school at all or they had encountered them from a negative perspective. When LGBT+ students do not see topics important to them in class, they may, in combination with violence outside of class, be left in emotional and social

³ The public opinion [survey](#) on LGBT topics by the Estonian Human Rights Center.

isolation. In addition, the way LGBT+ topics are handled in class also affects the attitudes and language of students and teachers, the impact of which has been discussed separately.

- Falling victim to bullying may weaken one's sense of belonging at school, negatively impact academic achievements, and harm mental health. For example, the LGBT+ students who had experienced above average bullying due to their sexual orientation, were less likely to have above average self-esteem, compared to those who had experienced less bullying (29% vs 51%).
- When LGBT+ students encounter more supportive teachers and school staff, when LGBT+ topics are discussed in a positive way in class, then all students are more likely to be more accepting of LGBT+ students, and the LGBT+ students feel safer and more belonging at school, they study better, and their mental health is better. For example, the LGBT+ students who had more supportive teachers and school staff also displayed higher mental health indicators (57% vs 38%) and lower depression indicators (38% vs 56%).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SAFETY OF THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Based on the results of the survey, the recommendations for improving the wellbeing of LGBT+ youth are the following:

To school managers and the Ministry of Education and Science

- To be a role model to the school family, the community, and society, by standing up for the vulnerable youth and daring to speak publicly about LGBT+ students and topics in education;
- To consider in one's activities (statements, projects etc) the differing levels of awareness on LGBT+ topics among different social groups, which is also reflected in schools;
- To support and encourage school principals and employees in addressing LGBT+ topics and in handling potential conflicts arising from it;
- To continuously cooperate with relevant organizations in the field.

To school principals

- To be a role model to the school family, the community, and society, by standing up for the vulnerable youth, by daring to speak publicly about LGBT+ students and topics in education, and by supporting and encouraging your colleagues;
- To support and encourage school staff members in discussing LGBT+ topics and in handling potential conflicts arising from it;
- To take part in and to motivate school staff to take part in additional trainings on working with LGBT+ and other vulnerable youth;
- To take part in additional trainings on general topics of bullying and safety, such as accessible space, safer space, inclusivity, bullying prevention, fair and accessible education etc;
- To assess in cooperation with the school staff the physical space at school and whether it offers all students, including LGBT+ students, a safe access to all classes and common spaces, including changing rooms and bathrooms, and to make the necessary adjustments;
- To compile regulations which include the clear description of the procedure of reporting and interfering in different situations, including in cases of bullying based on sexual and gender identity and gender expression, but also on disability, nationality, religion, or other characteristics, and to motivate students to familiarize themselves with it and to follow it.

To school staff

- To take part in additional trainings on topics concerning LGBT+ and other vulnerable youth to ensure the inclusivity and support for all students;
- To take part in additional trainings on general topics of bullying and safety, such as accessible space, safer space, inclusivity, bullying prevention, fair and accessible education etc;
- To remain professional when discussing any topic, including correct and inclusive language and science-based information;

- To integrate LGBT+ topics into the syllabus by addressing them personally or inviting relevant specialists to speak to the class;
- To support students in class and extracurricular activities who wish to address topics concerning LGBT+ and other vulnerable youth;
- To ensure access to LGBT+ materials in the school library.

To universities

- To offer specialists either studying or already working in the field of education the training on working with LGBT+ and other vulnerable youth;
- To continuously cooperate with relevant organizations in the field.

You are welcome to contact the Estonian LGBT Association when following these recommendations. The Association has significant experience in training the youth and specialists working with the youth, in compiling study materials, in everyday youth counseling, and in working with specialists in the education field.

ABOUT THE ESTONIAN LGBT ASSOCIATION

The Estonian LGBT Association is a non-profit organization working for people with different sexual and gender identities and their loved ones. The mission of the Estonian LGBT Association is supporting the LGBT+ community and their loved ones by offering support services and engaging in advocacy work, and raising awareness on LGBT+ topics in society.

Our work includes

- Community
 - Community center and library
 - Events, including support groups
 - Legal, psychological, and peer counseling
- Advocacy
 - Legal counseling
 - Representing the interests of the community
- Education
 - Trainings for specialists and the youth
 - Internships
 - Supervising research and other papers
- Strategic communication
 - Representation of the organization and the community in the media
 - Monitoring the media
 - Advising journalists

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