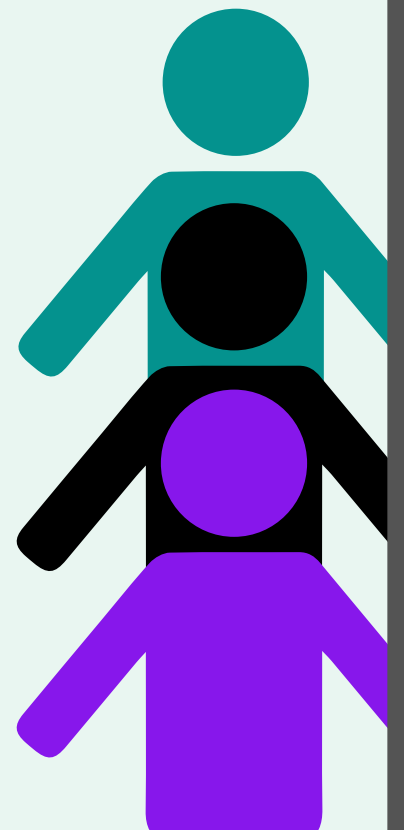


**A MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCY:**  
**COVID-19 and the Rising Mental Health**  
**Concerns Facing Philadelphia's**  
**Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual High School**  
**Students**

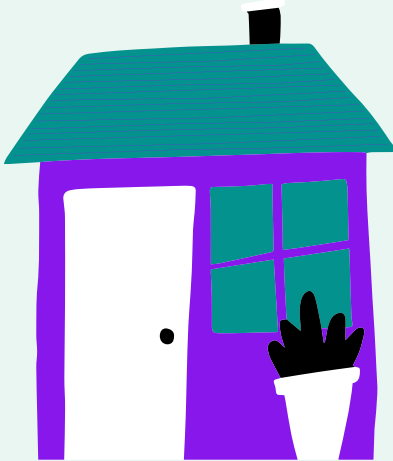
A graphical report prepared by Cameron McConkey, MPH  
Stoneleigh Emerging Leader Fellow @ Y-HEP Health Center  
Published: September 2020 | Data from: Spring 2019



# The COVID-19 School Year



**COVID-19 is greatly affecting the educational experiences of all students and families.**



**For LGBTQ+ students, social isolation from affirming peers, increased time spent at home with unsupportive caregivers, and less direct, in-person exposure to teachers, school counselors, and staff who are trained in suicide prevention are all causes for concern.**



**Unfortunately, recent data point to a mental health emergency that is already well beyond a tipping point.**

**In the spring of 2019, more than 1,200 students from 25 random Philadelphia public high schools completed the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.**

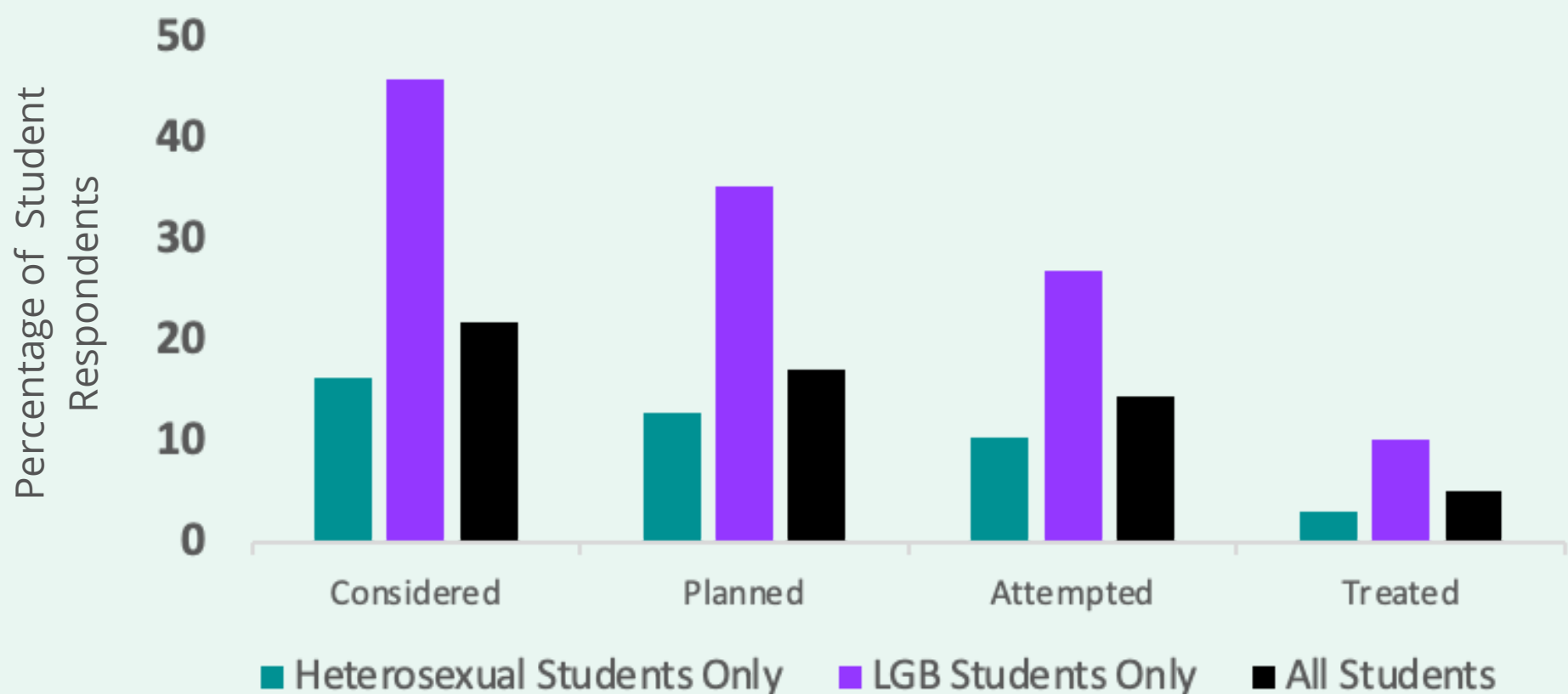
**Nearly ONE IN FOUR student respondents identified as **lesbian, gay, bisexual, or unsure** of their sexual orientation.**

**This was the first year the School District of Philadelphia asked a question about transgender identity, but the sample of students identifying as transgender was too small to make conclusive statements in this report.**

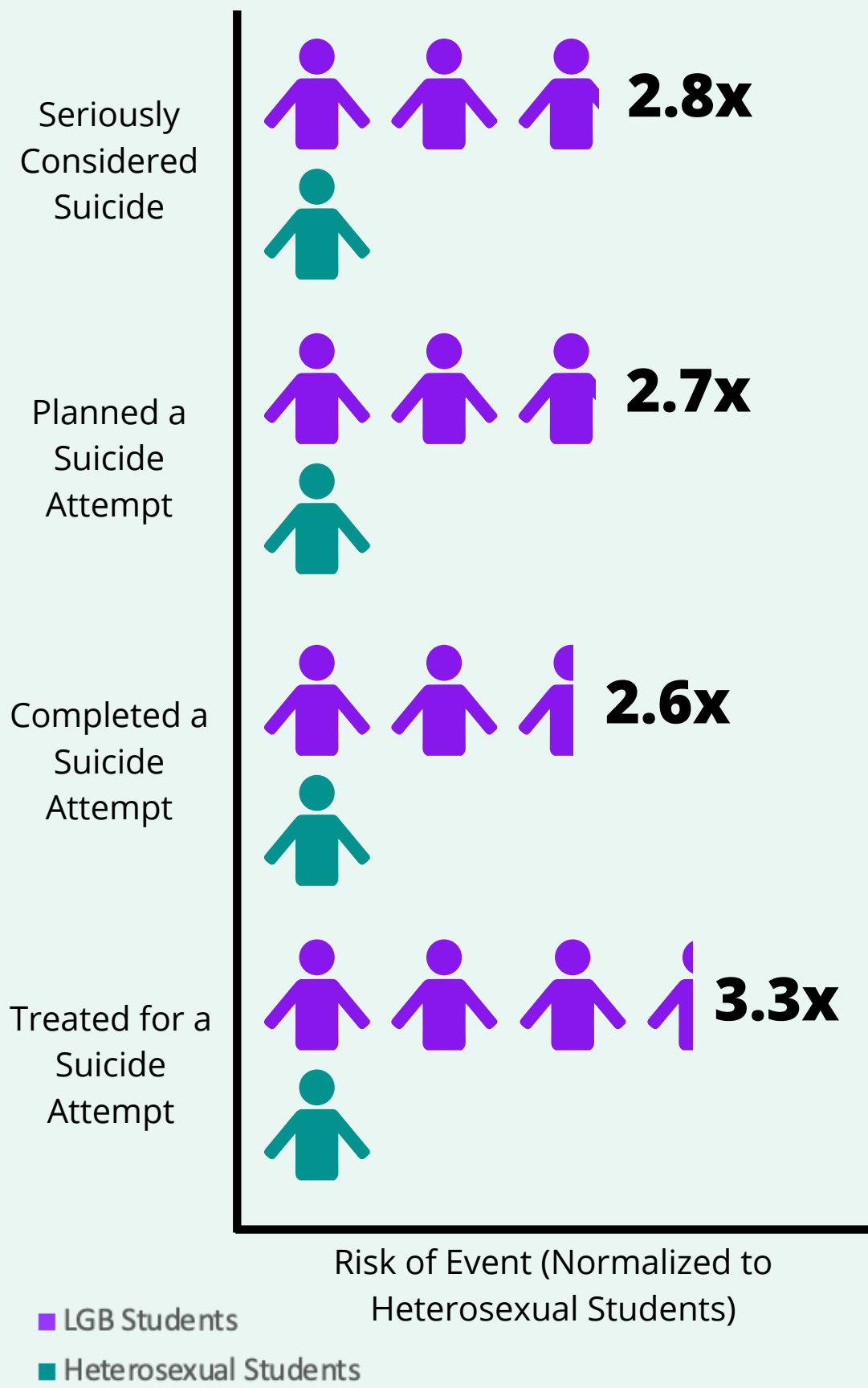


**For all respondents, regardless of sexual orientation, 2019 marked the HIGHEST LEVELS of suicidal ideation and mental health concerns in over a decade.**

**Nearly HALF of all **lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents** seriously considered suicide in the twelve months prior to the survey.**

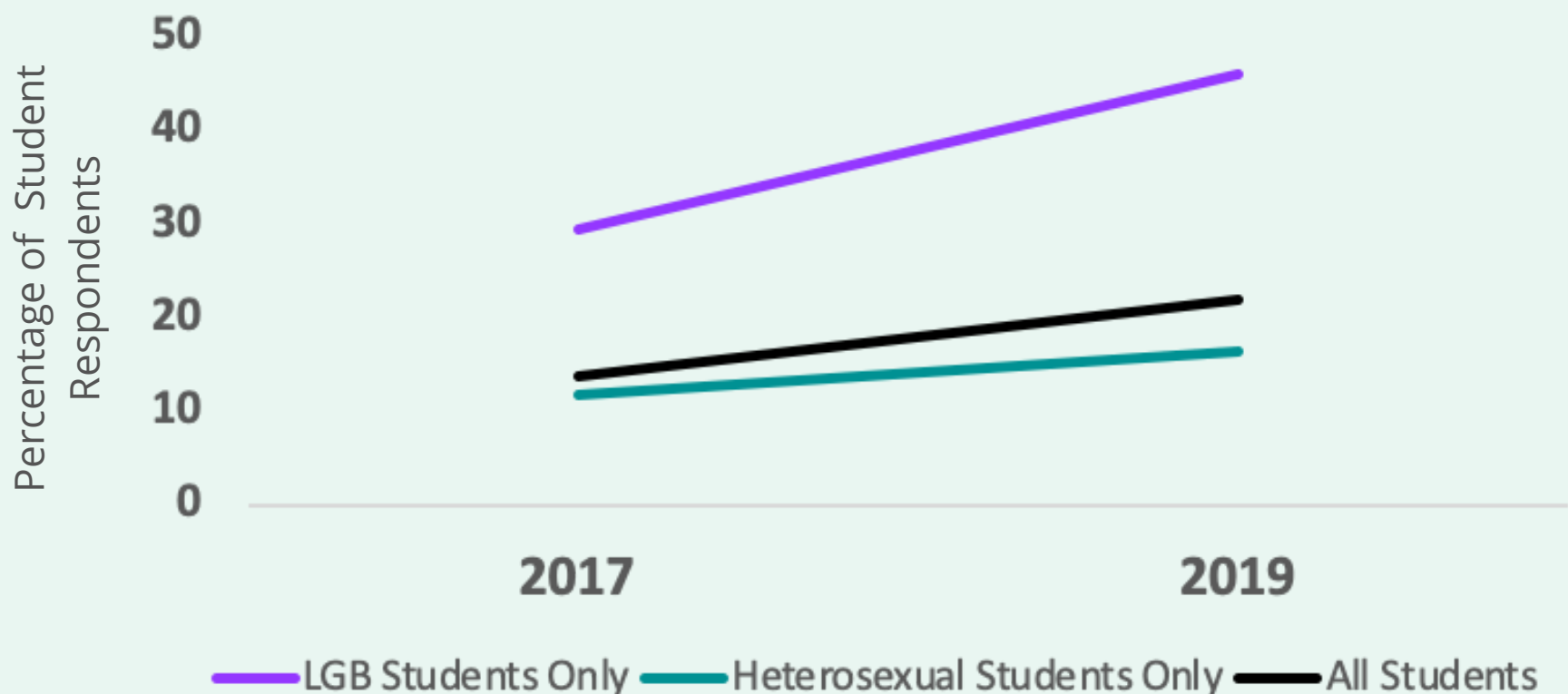


**In the 2018-19 school year, lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents were about THREE TIMES more likely to seriously consider, plan, attempt, or be treated for a suicide attempt than their heterosexual peers.**

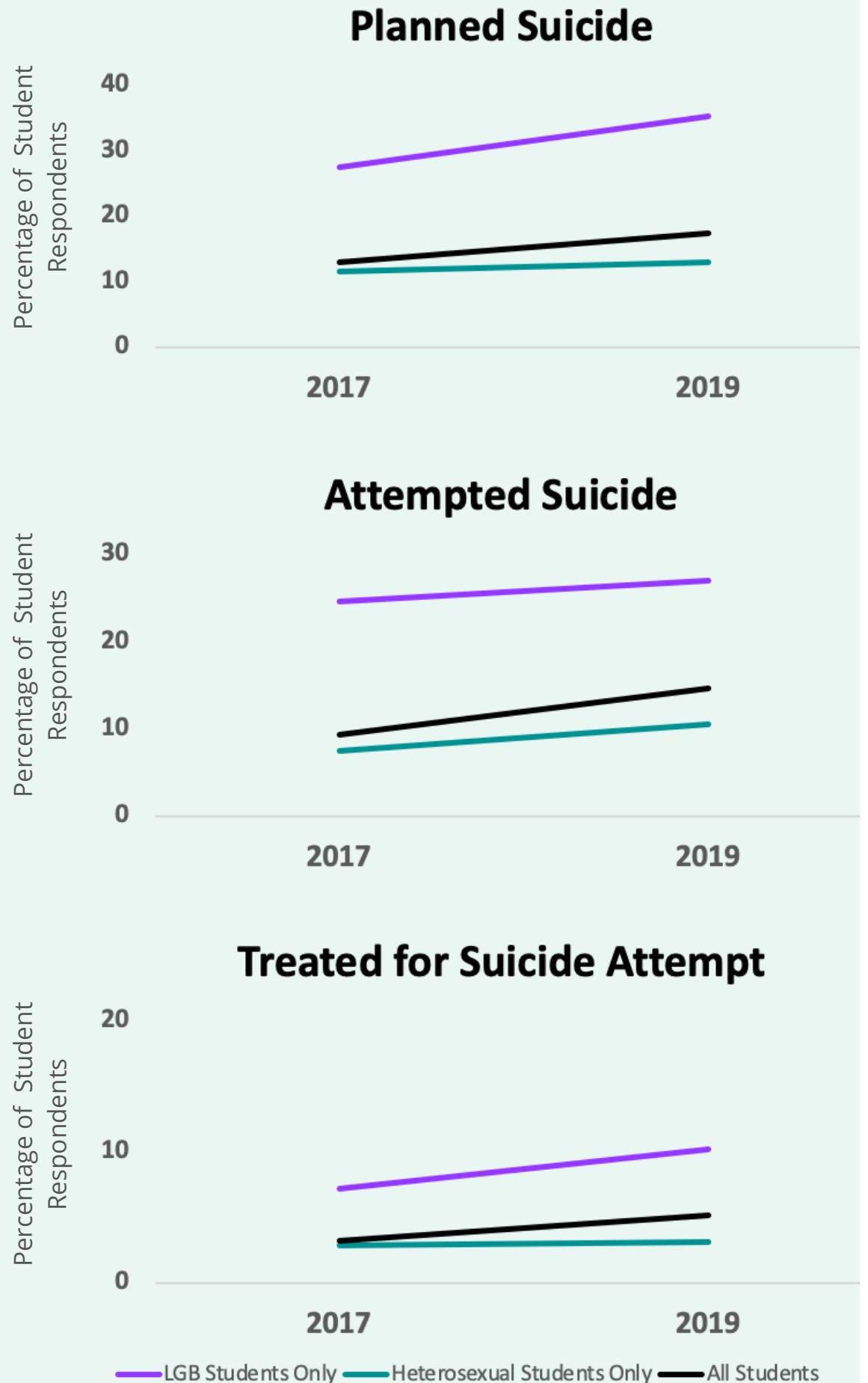
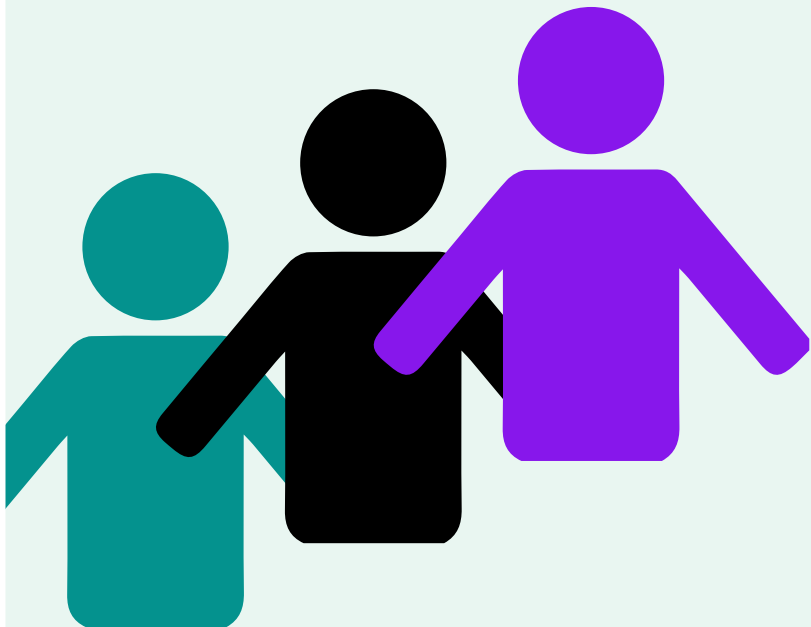


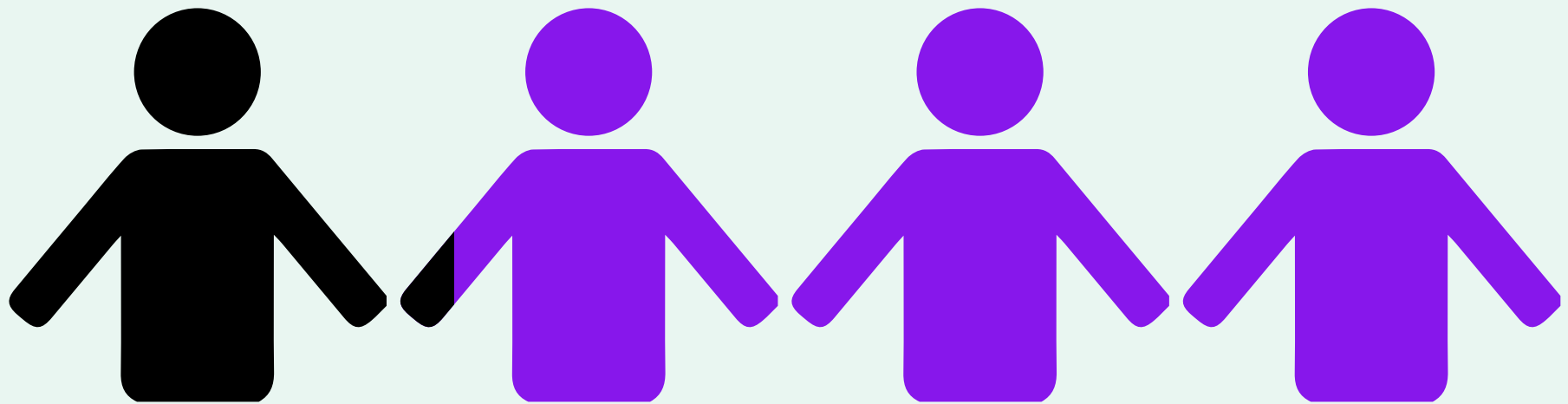
**For all students, serious consideration of suicide INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY since the YRBS was last conducted in 2017.**

**For lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents, serious consideration of suicide INCREASED BY 17% in just two years.**



**This two-year increase was seen across ALL indicators of suicidal ideation for all high school students, regardless of sexual orientation.**





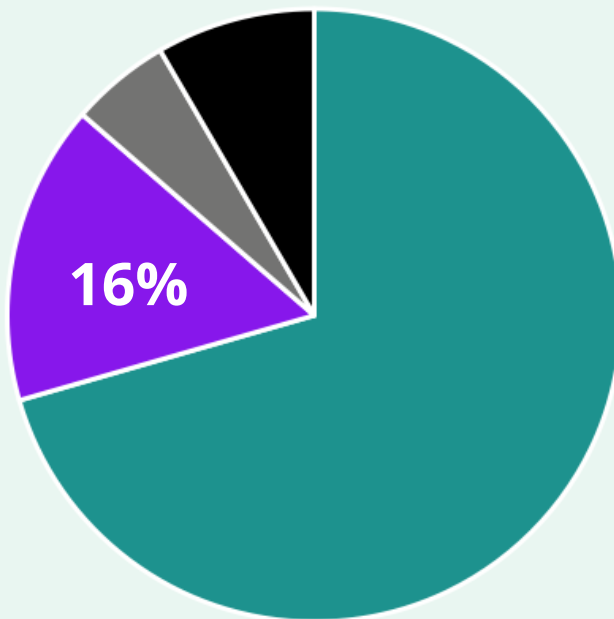
**In 2019, more than ONE OUT OF EVERY FOUR lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents attempted suicide at least once in the last year.**



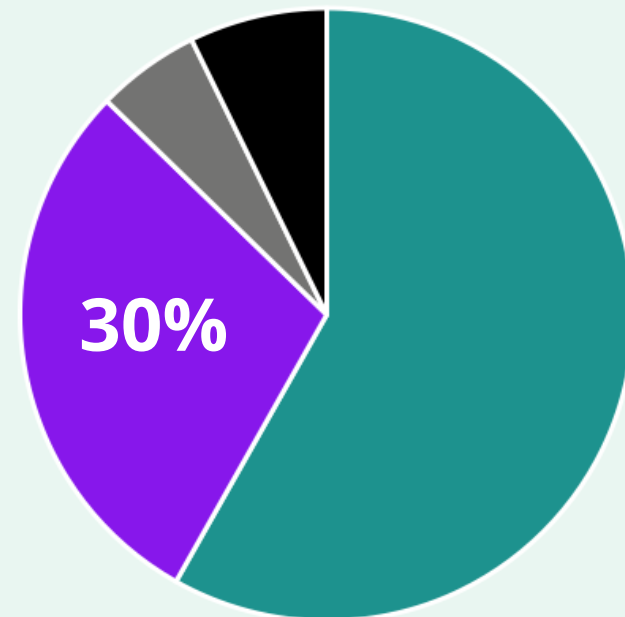
**Mental health and suicide are complex issues that can be exacerbated by many other social risk factors and experiences.**

**Lesbian, gay, and bisexual high school students are disproportionately impacted by many of these, including HOMELESSNESS.**

All Respondents  
(by sexual orientation)



Respondents Experiencing Homelessness  
(by sexual orientation)



■ Heterosexual ■ Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual ■ Unsure of Sexual Orientation ■ Missing Data

# Proposed Solutions

- **Peer Support Programs**

Many youth mental health advocates in Philadelphia want to expand capacity and access to youth peer support programs. These programs offer employment and professional development opportunities to young peer support specialists with lived experience managing and overcoming mental health problems and training to support others to do the same.

- **Additional LGBTQ+ and Suicide Prevention Training**

Youth advocates have successfully fought for rights related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in the School District of Philadelphia. However, the data in this report point to the critical need for all school district staff to have LGBTQ+ competency training embedded within and alongside suicide prevention and crisis response training.

- **Mental Health Through a Gender Identity Lens**

More needs to be done to understand the mental health experiences and struggles of Philadelphia's gender diverse students. Gender identity data can be used to develop gender-based and trans-affirming suicide prevention and mental health programs that would begin to address the unacceptable health outcomes experienced by gender diverse youth.

- **Understanding Intersectional Experiences**

Mental health issues, like suicide, are complex and intersectional. We know that LGBTQ+ students are at much greater risk of substance use disorder, homelessness and housing insecurity, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV. We also know that suicide is driven by discrimination of all forms, including racism, xenophobia, transphobia, and classism. Understanding these intersectional experiences must be a part of every LGBTQ+ and suicide prevention training for all levels of District staff.

- **Family Support and Education**

Family rejection is a major driver of youth suicide. Without family support, young LGBTQ+ people can struggle to find acceptance and embrace self-affirmation. Families of students need to be supported with therapeutic interventions and comprehensive education about LGBTQ+ identities and experiences. This is especially true as students are spending vastly more time at home and around family during COVID-induced remote learning.

- **Comprehensive Sex Education**

All students need comprehensive sex education to build healthy relationships and develop affirming views of their own bodies and identities. This is especially important for LGBTQ+ students who are often completely disregarded in heteronormative and trans-exclusive sex education curriculum, yet experience some of the highest levels of intimate partner and gender-based violence.

# 24/7 Crisis Resources

**For LGBTQ+ young people:**

**Call:** 1-866-488-7386

**Text:** "START" to 678-678

**Message:** [www.trevorproject.org](http://www.trevorproject.org)



**For transgender people of all ages:**

**Call:** 1-877-565-8860

**Visit:** [www.translifeline.org](http://www.translifeline.org)



**For people of all ages and identities:**

**Call:** (215) 686-4420

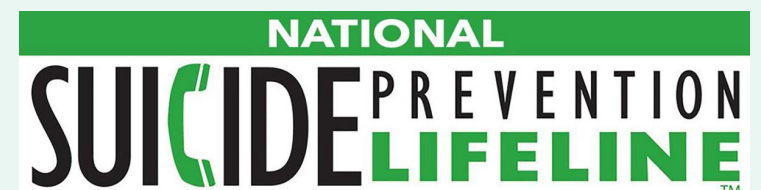
**Visit:** [www.healthymindsphilly.org](http://www.healthymindsphilly.org)



**For people of all ages and identities:**

**Call:** 1-800-273-8255

**Text:** "HOME" to 741-741

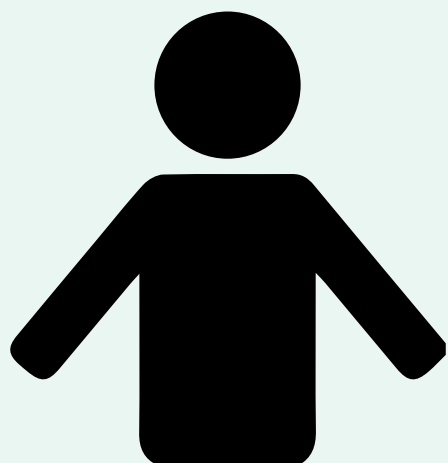


# More About the YRBS



The **Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS)** was developed in 1990 by the Division of Adolescent and School Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The **Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)** monitors health behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death, disability, and social issues among high school students in the United States.



It is administered every two years by the **School District of Philadelphia (SDP)**, usually in the spring semester, to a representative sample of high school students.



Read more about LGBTQ+ mental health  
at a national level from The Trevor Project:  
<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020/>



Read more about the 2019  
School District of Philadelphia YRBS:  
<https://www.philasd.org/research/2020/08/18/youth-risk-behavior-survey-selected-results-from-the-school-district-of-philadelphia/>

Contact the author of this report:  
[cmcconkey@fight.org](mailto:cmcconkey@fight.org)