

Outness and feelings of isolation among rural and urban gay, bisexual, and queer adolescent males: A mixed-methods study

Zenaida Rivera¹, Kathryn Macapagal¹, Zachary DuBois¹, Michele Ybarra², Tonya Prescott², & Brian Mustanski¹
¹The IMPACT Program, Department of Medical Social Sciences, Northwestern University
²Center for Innovative Public Health Research, San Clemente, CA



INTRODUCTION

Gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ) adolescent males are alone in facing increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS.¹ Most HIV prevention programs focus on GBQ adults or heterosexual youth. GBQ youth-focused programs that do exist often are developed with youth in urban areas, who may face different challenges and have different access to resources than youth in rural areas.

Understanding what differences, if any, exist in rural and urban GBQ adolescents' experiences can inform whether interventions should be tailored to meet their unique needs. Research suggests that two factors that may impact rural GBQ individuals' quality of life relative to their urban peers are "outness" about their sexual orientation and feelings of isolation.² Little work in this area has compared these experiences in rural and urban GBQ adolescent males, however.

This poster aims to characterize the experiences of isolation and outness using data from focus groups conducted as part of the development of Guy2Guy (G2G), a text-messaging-based HIV-prevention program for GBQ adolescent males.

METHODS

Participants & recruitment

75 adolescent GBQ males (14-18 years old, mean age: 16.4) took part in the focus groups. Participants were recruited nationally through online advertisements and LGBT organizations' websites.

Participants purposefully represented a range of geographic locations, race, ethnicity, and urbanicity (i.e., current residence in an urban or rural area; Table 1). We calculated urban/rural status using a Metropolitan Statistical Area code provided by SAS.³

Coding & analysis

Two independent coders reviewed transcripts for emergent themes. The code "outness/closetedness" was applied to 149 excerpts where participants referred to being out or closeted regarding their sexual orientation. The code "isolation" was applied to 24 references to feelings of exclusion or isolation related to participants' sexual orientation or sexual experience. Group differences were deemed significant if code application rates between the rural and urban groups differed by at least 20%.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

		% (n)
Urbanicity	Rural	29.3 (22)
	Urban	70.7 (53)
Sexual	Bisexual	18.7 (14)
	Gay	86.7 (65)
Orientation*	Queer	5.3 (4)
	Caucasian	54.7 (41)
Race	African American	5.3 (4)
	Asian	5.3 (4)
Mixed racial background	Mixed racial background	18.7 (14)
	Native American or Alaskan Native	1.3 (1)
Other	Other	14.7 (11)
	Hispanic	25.3 (19)
Ethnicity		

*Categories are not mutually exclusive

RESULTS

Rural v. Urban Outness/Closetedness

The code "Outness/closetedness" of sexual orientation was applied in the context of participants' discussions of these topics: texting and privacy, intervention concerns, dating/socializing, sexual decision making, and pressures to have sex.

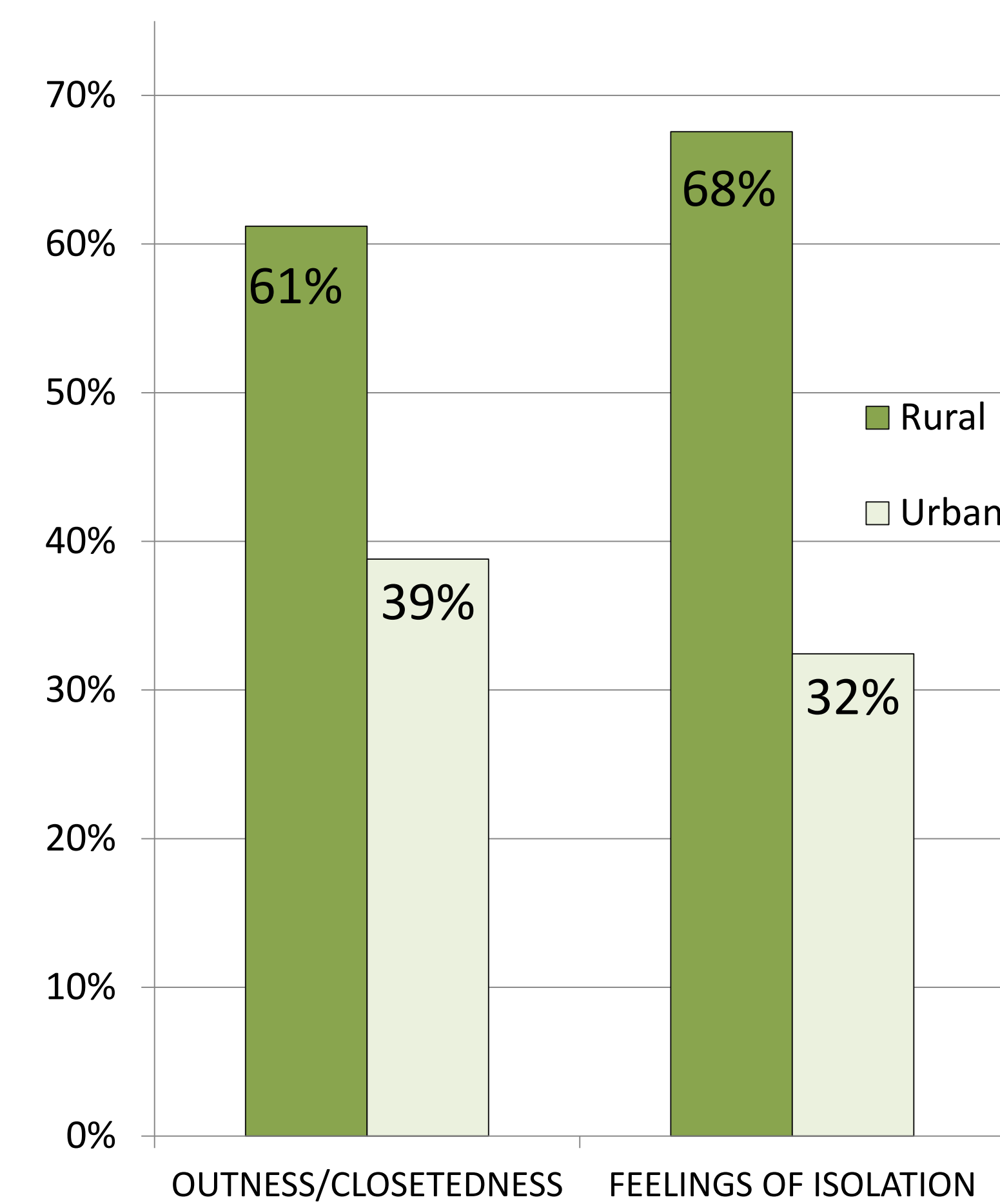
Similarities

Both rural and urban participants expressed concern that a participant could be outed by the intervention. Both groups discussed issues related to outness such as visibility (e.g., "people can/can't tell I'm gay"), religion, and dating.

Differences

Rural participants discussed issues related to being out or closeted more frequently than their urban counterparts (Fig. 1). Rural participants tended to discuss reasons they were out or closeted (Fig. 2A), while urban participants talked about possible or real reactions to their coming out (Fig. 2B). Rural participants discussed outness in more general terms (Fig. 2C), while urban participants discussed outness in terms of specific people who knew about their sexual orientation (Fig. 2D).

Figure 1: Percentages of code application



Rural v. Urban Feelings of Isolation

The code "Feelings of isolation" was applied in the context of participants' discussions of these topics: texting and privacy, pressures to have sex, dating/socializing, sources of sex education and resources, and pros and cons to having sex.

Similarities

Both urban and rural participants expressed feeling as if they were the only GBQ person they knew of.

Differences

Rural participants expressed feelings of isolation or exclusion almost twice as frequently than urban participants (Fig. 1). Rural participants talked most frequently about feeling as if they were the only GBQ male in their small town or area (Fig. 3A & 3C), whereas urban participants' reports of isolation primarily were in context of school, such as feeling like GBQ youth had unequal access to sexual health education, having a hard time meeting partners and friends, and feeling isolated because of sexual inexperience (Fig. 3B & 3D).

Figure 2. Outness/Closetedness

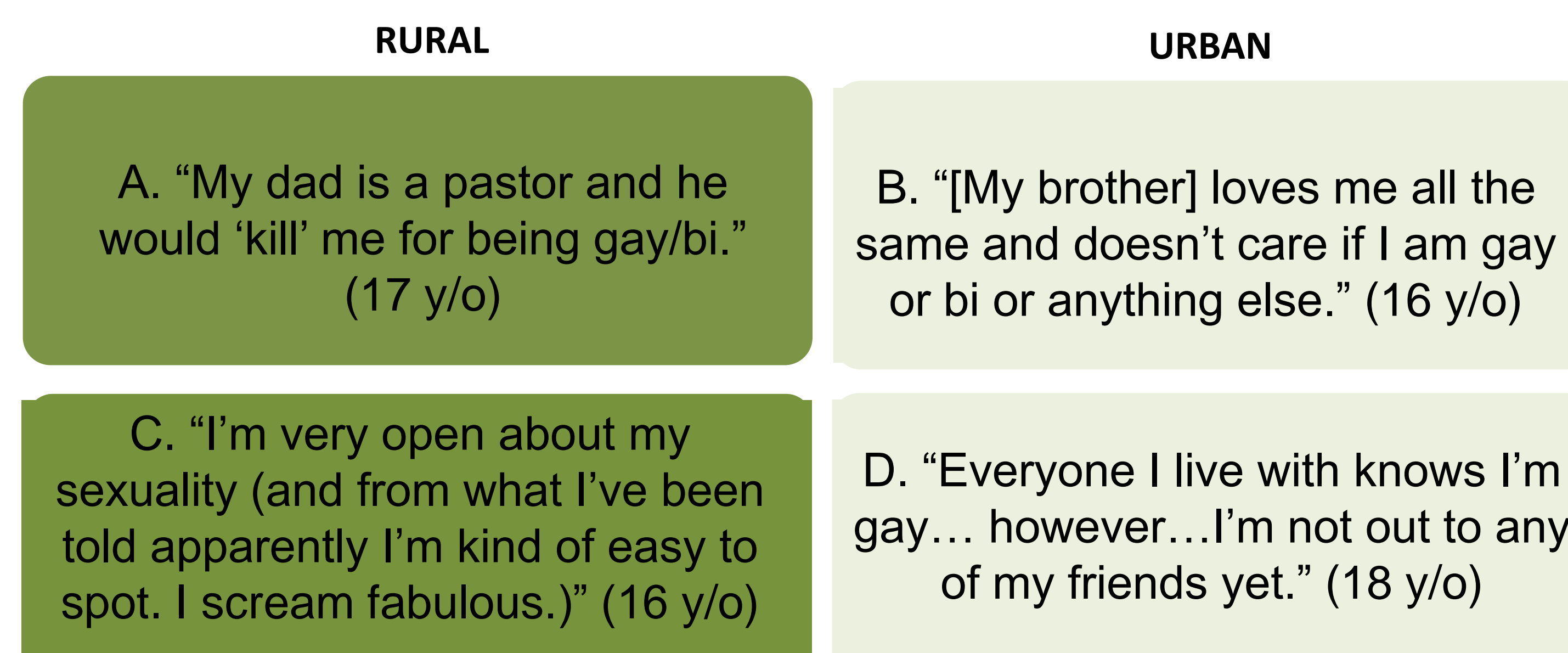
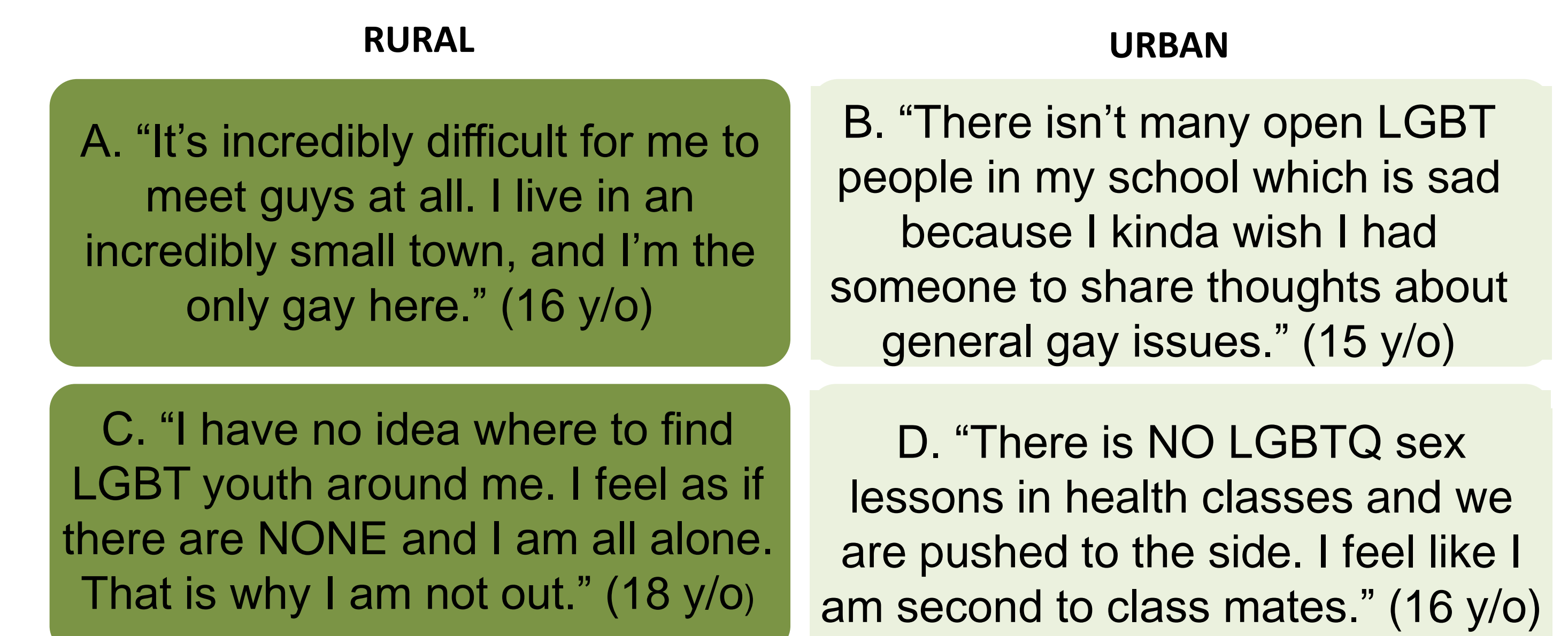


Figure 3. Feelings of Isolation



IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Although there are similarities and differences between rural and urban GBQ adolescent males' discussions of being out or closeted and their feelings of isolation, rural GBQ youth spoke more frequently about these topics compared to their urban peers. At the same time, both groups were concerned with the consequences of being out, and feeling isolated because of their sexual orientation, suggesting that these concerns are transcendent of place and resonate with many GBQ irrespective of where they live. While this research provided preliminary evidence for similarities and differences among rural and urban GBQ adolescents' experiences with outness and isolation, additional research using a larger sample and questions specific to outness and isolation may provide additional support for our findings.

These results suggest that programs in rural areas need to be particularly mindful of including strategies to reduce feelings of isolation. Urban youth in this study expressed interest in school-based outreach programs, which may help recognize, normalize, and validate GBQ youth's experiences of outness, closetedness, and isolation.

References: 1. CDC. (2013). HIV Surveillance Report, 2011. 2. D'Augelli, A. R., & Hart, M. M. (1987). Gay women, men and families in rural settings: Toward the development of helping communities. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 15(1), 79-93. 3. Hadden L, Zdeb M. A well-kept SAS® secret. *31st Annual SAS® Users Groups International Conference (SUGI 31)*. San Francisco, CA2006.

Acknowledgements: This study was funded by NIMH R01 MH096660-01A1 to Michele Ybarra & Brian Mustanski. We would like to thank all the youth who participated in this research.