

3.5 Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline Study

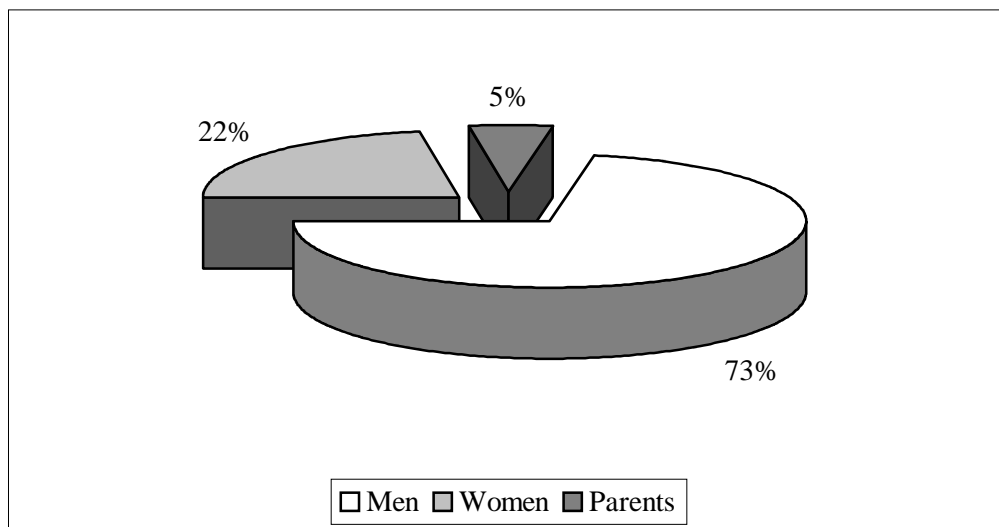
Data

Historically, most of the young people who attend ReachOUT's Youth Group have accessed the service through the Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline. As such, the Helpline is our main referral agency. This data was obtained from the Helpline's records.

Eight per cent of the 724 calls received by the Helpline in 1995/96 were from young people or were youth-related, as were eight per cent of 563 calls in 1996/97 (Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline, 1996; 1997).

From the records it emerged that there were 262 youth/youth-related calls to the Helpline between January 1993 and August 1998. These calls were from young men, young women and parents as shown in Chart 21.

Chart 21: Proportion of Youth/Youth-Related Calls to Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline (between January 1993 and August 1998)

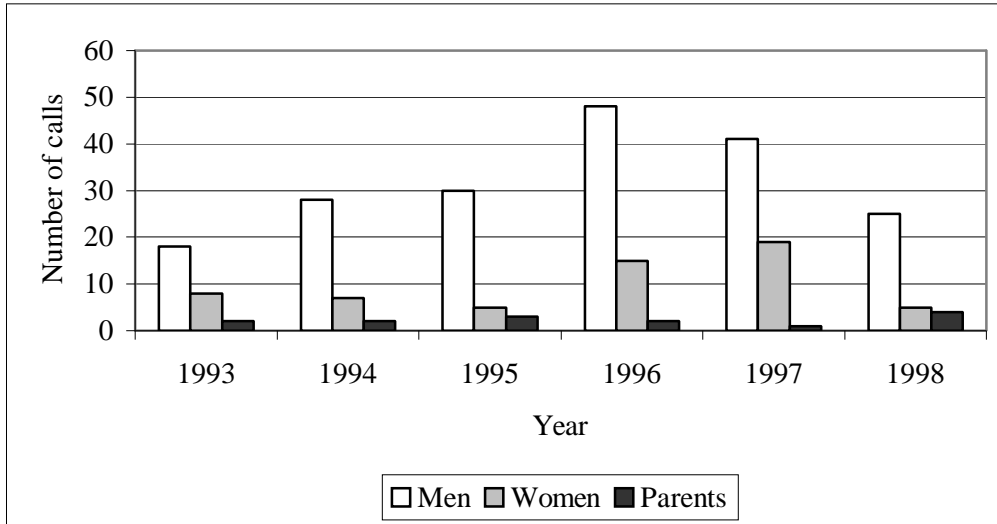


Note: $n = 262$

Seventy-three per cent of calls received by the Helpline during this period were from young men; only 22 per cent were from young women.

The number of calls from young men and women had increased significantly, as can be seen in Chart 22.

Chart 22: Annual Number of Youth/Youth-Related Calls (between January 1993 and August 1998)

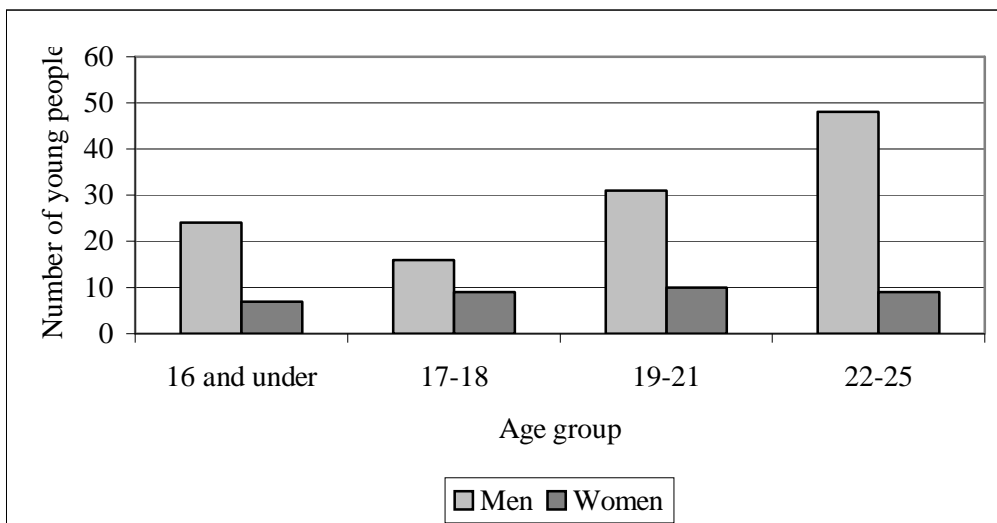


Note: $n = 262$; 1998 is not a complete year's data set.

Calls from young people more than doubled between 1993 and 1997 and there was a significant increase in calls in 1996, the year following ReachOUT's formation.

Chart 23 shows the number of calls from young men and women and Table 32, their age.

Chart 23: Number of Calls from Young Men and Women (between January 1993 and August 1998)



Note: $n = 249$

Table 32: Age of Young Callers (between January 1993 and August 1998)

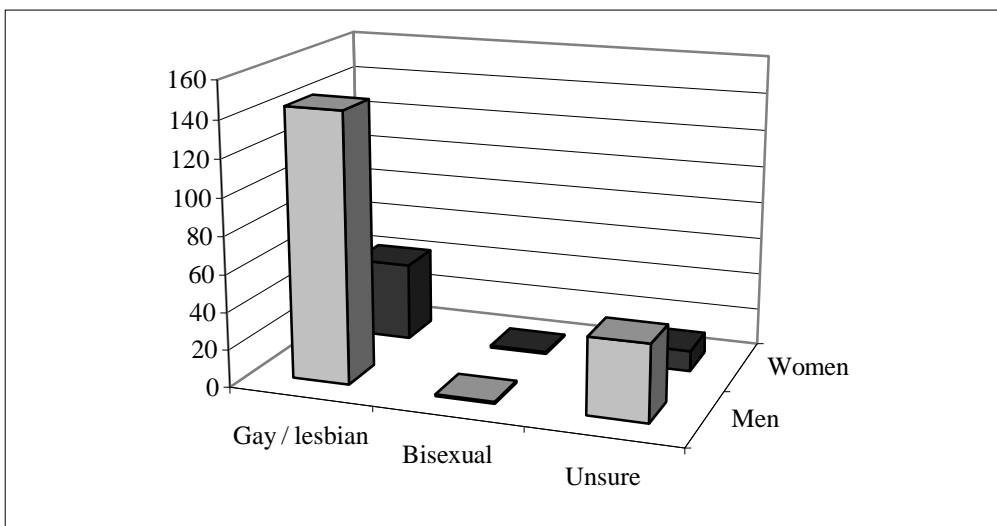
	16 and under	17-18	19-21	22-25
Men (1)	20%	14%	26%	40%
Women (2)	20%	26%	26%	28%

Notes: (1) $n = 119$; (2) $n = 35$

In terms of age, 20 per cent of calls were from young men and women aged 16 or less. It is also evident from Table 32 that calls from young women during this period then tended to be evenly spread within the 17-25 age-range whereas a significantly *lower* proportion of young men called when aged 17-18 and a significantly *higher* proportion of young men called when aged 22-25.

From Chart 24 it can be seen that 75 per cent of young men and young women identified as gay or lesbian, two people identified as bisexual and 20 per cent of young men and young women were unsure about their sexual identity.

Chart 24: Sexual Identity of Young Callers (between January 1993 and August 1998)



Notes: Men, $n = 189$; women, $n = 54$

From Table 33 it seems there were four main reasons young people were calling the Helpline: to request support, to request information, to talk about a specific issue and to meet other young people (through referral to other helping organisations). The major issues facing these young people can be summarised as feelings of isolation, confusion about identity, the need for information, problems around sex and sexual health and mental health issues.

Table 33: Types of Call made by Young People (between January 1993 and August 1998)

Type of call	Men (1)	Women (2)
Abuse	3	
Bullying	1	
Coming out	12	2
Cottaging	2	
Had a crush		3
Domestic violence	1	
Requested one-to-one session	10	4
Gender dysphoria and cross dressing	8	
Housing and homelessness	2	
Requested information about local gay groups	9	2
Requested information about local gay scene	14	4
Felt isolated	4	4
Requested legal advice		1
Wanted to meet others	9	6
Relationship problems	4	1
Religion	2	
Information and referred to Dorothy's Granddaughters (3)		1
Information and referred to Monday Night Group (4)		4
Information and referred to ReachOUT	60	17
Requested sexual health information	8	
Sex problems	7	
Felt suicidal	2	1
Wanted to talk	19	5
Felt worried	9	2

Notes: (1) $n = 186$; (2) $n = 57$; (3) a young bisexual and lesbian women's group; (4) a bisexual and lesbian women's group.

Young men and women tended to call the Helpline for similar reasons. Twenty-seven per cent of young men and 36 per cent of young women called the Helpline for support (for example, to request one-to-one sessions with Helpline volunteers, etc.). Seventeen per cent of young men and ten per cent of young women called for information (for example, about the local scene and helping agencies, etc.). Twenty-four per cent of young men and 17 per cent of young women called to discuss a specific issue (for example, coming out, relationship issues, etc.). Thirty-two per cent of young men and 37 per cent of young women requested information about, or were referred to, other helping organisations (for example, ReachOUT, etc.).

However, there were some significant differences. Several types of call were made exclusively by young men: requests for information about safer sex and sexual health, wanting to discuss gender dysphoria and cross dressing, sexual problems, cottaging, housing and homelessness, violence, religion, bullying and abuse. There was one type of call that was exclusively made by young women, namely wanting to talk about having a crush on someone.

Table 34 details how these young people found out about the Helpline prior to making their call.

Table 34: Sources of Information about Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline Prior to Call (between January 1993 and August 1998)

Source	Men	Women
Gay media	4	1
Leaflet	5	
Local gay scene	1	
Local media	6	1
<i>Phone Book / Yellow Pages</i>	10	
Referred by GP		2
Referred by local gay organisations	3	
Referred by No.5 (youth counselling agency)	1	1
Referred by Samaritans	3	1
Referred by school		1

Notes: (1) $n = 29$; (2) $n = 7$

Significantly, 50 per cent of the young men obtained their information about how to contact the Helpline through the Helpline's own publicity material or through the local *Phone Book* and *Yellow Pages*. Seventy-five per cent of the young women were referred to the Helpline by other agencies compared to only 20 per cent of young men (these agencies included GPs, the Samaritans, a school, a youth counselling organisation and other local bisexual, gay and lesbian organisations). Thirty-three per cent of young men and women saw adverts about the Helpline's service in the local and gay and lesbian media (for example, newspapers and radio).

It can be seen from Table 35 that 64 per cent of these young people lived in Reading (66 per cent of young men and 59 per cent of young women), 20 per cent lived in other areas of the county (21 per cent of young men and 17 per cent of young women) and 16 per cent lived in neighbouring counties (13 per cent of young men and 20 per cent of young women).

Table 35: Area of Residence of Young Callers (for Calls Received between January 1993 and August 1998)

Area	Men	Women
Basingstoke	5	
Beaconsfield		1
Bracknell	9	2
Camberley	2	1
Cookham	1	
Henley	3	3
High Wycombe	4	1
Maidenhead	9	1
Newbury	3	1
Oxford	1	1
Reading	103	24
Silchester	1	
Slough	4	1
Southampton	1	1
Swindon	1	
Windsor	4	
Wokingham	4	2
Yately	2	

Notes: (1) $n = 157$; (2) $n = 41$.

The Helpline also received several letters from young people during this period, as shown in Figure 33.

Figure 33: Details of Correspondence Received from Young People (from January 1991 to August 1998)

Year	Client	Details	Source	Area of residence
1991	Female, aged 24	She was raped and beaten by her boyfriend. She wanted to come out as lesbian.		Windsor
1992	Male, Aged 17	He felt isolated and pressured by others' expectations. He had a girlfriend but wanted to come out as gay.		Maidenhead
1992	Female	She requested information about homosexuality.		Reading
1995	Male, Aged 24	Requested information on the local gay scene and groups.	Advert in <i>Gay Times</i>	Reading
1995	Male, Gay	He requested information about ReachOUT.		Reading
Undated	Male, Aged 21	He requested information about ReachOUT.		Reading

The main issues arising from this correspondence included young people seeking support around coming out and those seeking information about the local scene and helping organisations.

Figure 34 outlines the issues arising in the one-to-one sessions conducted by Helpline volunteers in this period.

Figure 34: Details of One-to-One Sessions with Young People (between January 1993 and December 1997)

Date	Age and gender	Issues arising in the session
1993	Male Aged 16	He was a student and was met together with his mother. He wanted to meet other gay people and they were accompanied to the local gay pub.
1993	Female Aged 19	She lived in Buckinghamshire. She had had relationships with women but felt isolated. She was accompanied to the Monday Night Group.
1994	Male Aged 20	He had just come out to supportive parents. He wanted information on safer sex and the local gay scene.
1994	Female Aged 22	She wanted introductions to the lesbian scene. She was accompanied to the Monday Night Group.
1994	Male	He wanted to start a bisexual, gay and lesbian youth group.
1994	Male Aged 19	He felt very isolated and felt he had no one to talk to.
1995	Male Aged 19	He had just come out to supportive parents and wanted to meet others.
1995	Female Aged 20	She felt very isolated and was in a difficult relationship.
1995	Male Aged 19	He felt very isolated and was accompanied to the local gay pub.
1995	Female Aged 24	She had had a nervous breakdown after several failed relationships with men. She wanted to meet other women and was accompanied to the Monday Night Group.
1996	Male Aged 16	He had problems coming to terms with being gay. He was being bullied at school and had had problems with his mum. He was lacking in confidence and was referred to ReachOUT.
1996	Male Aged 22	He was a college student and wanted to talk about family relationships and coming out to parents.
1996	Male Aged 20	He wanted to talk and was accompanied to the local gay pub.
1997	Male Aged 23	He didn't show up.

1997	Male Aged 21	Asian Muslim who was out at university but was not comfortable with his sexual identity. He wanted to meet 'normal' gay people and was accompanied to the local gay pub.
------	-----------------	--

The main issues arising in these sessions can be summarised as the need to talk, the need for support, requests for information and the desire to meet other young bisexuals, gays and lesbians.

Fourteen parents contacted the Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline between January 1993 and August 1998: 11 mothers and three fathers.

- Six of the parents were worried about their children's sexual identity and wanted to talk.
- Five of the parents requested information and support.
- One father was frightened by his child's sexual identity.
- One mother was concerned that her son was feeling isolated and depressed and she specifically requested information about ReachOUT.
- Six of the parents lived in Reading, one in Henley and one in Slough.

Discussion

Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline has played an important role in ReachOUT's development, not least as ReachOUT's main referral agency. ReachOUT has twice provided training to Helpline volunteers around bisexual, gay and lesbian youth issues and the referral procedure.

Eight per cent of calls to the Helpline in 1997 were youth or youth-related and this represents a doubling between 1993-97. Significantly, 73 per cent of these calls were from young men and only 22 per cent from young women, and 20 per cent of calls were from those aged 16 or less. These facts have important implications for the Helpline: its publicity strategy, the issues covered by the training it provides for its volunteers and given the sensitivity of the issue of age and sexual identity, political implications. Interestingly, 75 per cent of callers were sure about their sexual identity and only 20 per cent were unsure.

The reasons that young people contacted the Helpline (by calling, requesting one-to-one sessions or making postal requests) seem to be similar: to request information, to talk about a specific issue and to meet other bisexual, gay and lesbian young people.

Their issues also seem to be similar: feelings of isolation, confusion about identity, the need for information and mental and sexual health issues. However, there were issues particular to young men: gender dysphoria and cross-dressing.

Fifty per cent of the young men who contacted the Helpline found out about the service through the Helpline's own publicity material whereas 75 per cent of young women were referred to the service. This has important implications for the Helpline's publicity strategy and ensuring that all sections of the community have access to its services.

Sixty-four per cent of the young people contacting the Helpline during this period lived in the Reading area, a significant proportion called from other areas of the county and from other counties in the region. The Helpline therefore has a wide catchment area and this too has implications for its publicity strategy.

The Helpline also received calls from parents seeking support around their children's sexual identity. This has implications for the skills and training that Helpline volunteers require.

The evidence suggests that more young people – specifically, more young men – are contacting the Helpline at an early age and who are sure about their sexual identity. They are increasingly seeking information, peers and support rather than just an opportunity to discuss their identity over the telephone; they are seeking to end their exclusion and isolation.

This trend has a number of important implications. Given the sensitivity around the issue of age, there are political consequences not least concerning the age of consent. The provision of services to those under the age of consent is both a sensitive issue and increasingly, a fact of life. It also has implications for both the Helpline and ReachOUT – and other providers of services to young bisexual, gay and lesbian people – in terms of what skills their workers require, and indeed what services they offer to bisexual, gay and lesbian youth.