



Queer Criminology and LGBT Issues in the Criminal Legal System

October 26, 2017

Presented Carrie Buist, Ph.D., Assistant Professor at Grand Valley State University and Emily Lenning, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Fayetteville State University

The first two presentations given at the Juvenile Justice Vision 20/20 training event that took place at Grand Valley State University's Pew Campus on Thursday, October 26th, 2017 were presented by Dr. Carrie L. Buist of Grand Valley State University and Dr. Emily Lenning of Fayetteville State University. Their presentations focused on the treatment of LGBTQ individuals as victims, offenders, and employees in the juvenile justice system, or the "criminal legal system" with the explanation for this terminology being that not everyone, especially individuals who identify as LGBTQ, experience justice when they become a part of the criminal justice system. For this reason, the speakers felt that it was more appropriate and accurate to use "criminal legal system" throughout both of their talks.

The two presentations delivered by Dr. Buist and Dr. Lenning detailed information such as what Queer Criminology is ("focuses on the experiences of LGBTQ youth folks in the criminal legal system"), terminology used by youth to identify themselves (their gender identity), as well as the multiple issues that these youth face that can lead them to become a part of the criminal legal system. These issues include: bullying in and expulsion from school, no home life or a poor home life where abuse or neglect often takes place, as well as being displaced from their homes and left with nowhere else to go. This, as Dr. Buist and Dr. Lenning concluded, results in children who have no family bonds, no home to live in, and are left in impoverished conditions. These factors can, and do, lead to an increased probability of LGBTQ youth becoming involved in the juvenile justice/criminal legal system.

LGBTQ youth and individuals experience many disparities when they have contact with or become a part of the juvenile justice/criminal legal system. One such disparity is harassment of LGBTQ individuals by police. Statistics provided during the presentation to support this statement included: "nearly 50% of respondents reported some level of discomfort seeking help from police", "29% were harassed or disrespected", "20% were denied equal treatment from police", and "6% reported physical assault by police". Furthermore, once in the system, LGBTQ youth face many difficult situations. This presentation also pointed to the issue of longer sentences being given to youth who identify as LGBTQ than are given to youth who identify as straight. LGBTQ youth also experience high rates of sexual contact with staff of detention centers and sexual assault from their peers, when compared to straight youth who are similarly detained.

Some of the greatest challenges to overcome within the criminal legal system when it comes to dealing with different groups of people, such as LGBTQ youth, are: lack of education, policy issues in the intake process, as well as combating the preconceived notions that criminal legal system employees have when it comes to the clothing that the youth who have contact with the system wear. According to the presentation, an individual's appearance, when at odds with how a criminal legal system employee thinks that someone should look, can lead to unequal treatment of the individual due to a lack of education/understanding on the part of the employee.



To combat these challenges, Dr. Buist and Dr. Lenning stressed the importance of creating and implementing new policies that will prevent entire groups of people, such as LGBTQ individuals, from being devalued. It was stated during the presentations that “if the government does not see a group of people as first class, then no one else will see them as first class”. If the message from the government to people is that LGBTQ individuals are second class citizens, then these marginalized people will be seen as “easier prey” to people who seek to do them harm, because law enforcers will look the other way.

Many heartbreaking stories were presented during Dr. Buist and Dr. Lenning’s presentation that gave unforgettable examples of the heinous crimes that individuals who identify as LGBTQ endure from both every day citizens, as well as professionals that work within the juvenile justice/criminal legal system. Both presentations addressed the importance that the “rule making” individuals who attended this training seminar, as well as everyone who holds a position of power within the criminal legal system, have the ability and the responsibility to make great changes and have broad influence over the treatment that LGBTQ youth receive when they come into contact with the system.