

Civil Rights & Teens

Civil rights are not just history. You have a right to live, work, learn and play free from discrimination. Equal opportunity is **YOUR** civil right!

Not all prejudiced behavior rises to the level of illegal discrimination. **But it may be illegal discrimination if the way someone treats you stands between you and an education, a job, your home, or a public place or service.** If you are treated differently, harassed, bullied or denied access to a public place or service (including an education) based on your sex, race, color, ancestry, national origin, disability or religion, you may be a victim of illegal discrimination.

Discrimination changes with the times and technology. You're not likely to be denied service at a lunch counter, made to sit in the back of a bus or not allowed to vote because of your race or gender. But some of these things might sound familiar:

- A classmate is constantly bullied by demeaning text messages or FaceBook posts because of his race or religion...
- A sexy cell phone photo, meant for one person, is forwarded all over the school...
- An embarrassing webcam video is posted online...
- A teacher singles out minority students for discipline while ignoring the same behavior from others...
- One student constantly picks on another, making negative comments about his religion or the country where he was born...
- A teacher makes sexually suggestive comments to a student or promises better grades for sex...
- A student receives repeated, unwanted "sexts" from a coach or a boss...
- A student who uses a wheelchair has no access to an auditorium or after-school activities...
- A student who has seizures, or asthma, or learning disabilities is taunted by peers...

These things may be cruel, unfair, or abuses of power. But if they are severe or pervasive enough, they can also be illegal discrimination because they deny someone's right to equal opportunity.

Learn more about your rights and responsibilities and how to file a complaint of illegal discrimination at **www.phrc.state.pa.us**.



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Myth & Reality

Myth: Bullies* have been around forever. There's nothing you can do to stop them.

Reality: You can and should talk to a parent, teacher, principal or counselor. It's the school's responsibility to stop illegal discrimination, but you have to report it. Your school handbook should have policies & tell you what to do. If the problem doesn't stop, or if there's no discrimination policy, you can consult PHRC. Find out how online at www.phrc.state.pa.us. (* Remember, not all bullying is illegal discrimination, but you should seek help regardless of the reason for bullying.)

Myth: When someone has power over you — like grades, or a scholarship, playing time or a paycheck — there's nothing you can do.

Reality: It is illegal to retaliate against someone who files a complaint or opposes illegal discrimination. You cannot legally be punished for filing a complaint, being a witness, or going to a teacher or administrator about illegal discrimination.

Myth: Only racial minorities and women can suffer discrimination.

Reality: Discriminators can come in all colors, genders, religions & abilities. They are usually the group in power, but not always. The law does not specify which race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability or ancestry it protects, but there are factors and groups of people it does not include. For example, in employment, age discrimination only applies to people who are 40 and over. (Sorry.) And tattoos and piercings are not protected factors. There are other examples, but you get the idea.

Myth: You have to be an adult to be sexually harassed.

Reality: Sexual harassment happens in schools and workplaces, and is illegal regardless of the age of the victim or harasser. Even if you can't file a complaint against a minor, your school or employer may be responsible, so you need to report it.

Myth: It is against the law to discriminate against someone because they are gay or a lesbian.

Reality: Current state & federal civil rights laws* offer no protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression. State and federal laws have been proposed, but not yet passed. Your school, town or the company you work for may have policies or ordinances against LGBT-based discrimination, and PHRC may be able to help if you report it. (* Federal hate crime laws cover LGBT-based crimes.)



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“This week, we sadly lost two young men who took their own lives for one unacceptable reason: they were being bullied and harassed because they were openly gay or believed to be gay. These unnecessary tragedies come on the heels of at least three other young people taking their own lives because the trauma of being bullied and harassed for their actual or perceived sexual orientation was too much to bear.

“This is a moment where every one of us - parents, teachers, students, elected officials, and all people of conscience - needs to stand up and speak out against intolerance in all its forms. Whether it's students harassing other students because of ethnicity, disability or religion; or an adult, public official harassing the President of the University of Michigan student body because he is gay, it is time we as a country said enough. No more. This must stop.”

— Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, Oct. 1, 2010