

# Developmental Assets among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth: Latent Classes of External Assets and Resources

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## Background

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth face well-documented disparities in mental health, including greater risk for depression (Marshal et al., 2011) and attempted suicide (Haas et al., 2011), relative to heterosexual youth.

- Prior research has found that LGB youth experience less support and acceptance in family, school, and community contexts compared to heterosexual youth (e.g., Saewyc, 2011), in particular due to minority stress processes (Meyer, 2003).
- Yet, LGB youth also have important relationships and opportunities (i.e., external assets) that help buffer these risks and promote thriving.
- To date, few studies have comprehensively examined ecological assets that may promote well-being among LGB youth.

To redress this gap, we examined LGB youths' experiences of external developmental assets using latent class analysis (LCA).

- Person-centered approaches are apt for examining heterogeneous experiences, such as LGB youth's external assets, and associations with well-being (Collins & Lanza, 2010).

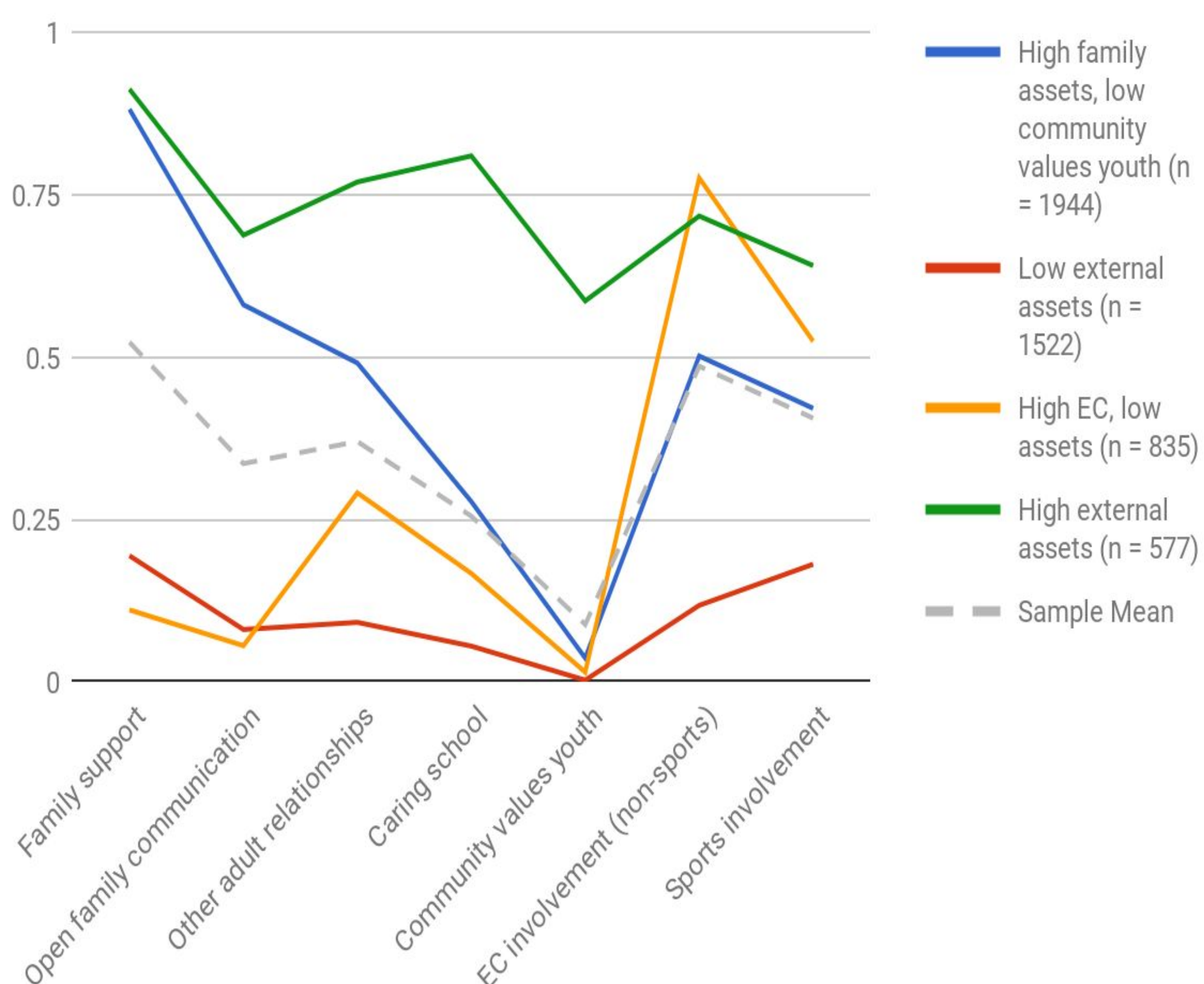


Figure 1. Item-response probabilities of latent class indicators for the 4-class model

## Methods

Secondary data analysis was conducted of the Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes & Behavior Survey. Data were independently collected in US public middle and high schools ( $n = 121,150$ ) by Search Institute.

- The current sample includes a subset of cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents ( $n = 4,878$ ;  $M_{age} = 15.1$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ), including bisexual girls (58.9%), lesbian girls (12.1%), bisexual boys (16.7%), and gay boys (12.3%)
- About a quarter of the sample lived in urban areas (27.6%), and 56.5% of youth reported their parents had completed college (or more).
- A majority of the sample identified as White (54.3%), with fewer youth identifying as Asian (16.7%), Black (6.2%), Latinx (8.7%), or multiracial (10.3%).
- LCA indicators consisted of seven external assets: family support (3 items), open family communication (2 items), other adult relationships (3 items), caring school climate (3 items), community values youth (3 items), extracurricular activity participation (non-sports, 5 items) and sports participation (1 item). Each measure was averaged and dichotomized based on an aspirational cut-off ( $>3$  on 5-point Likert scale). Suicide attempts (0 = Never vs. 1 = Ever attempted) were examined as a distal outcome of class membership.

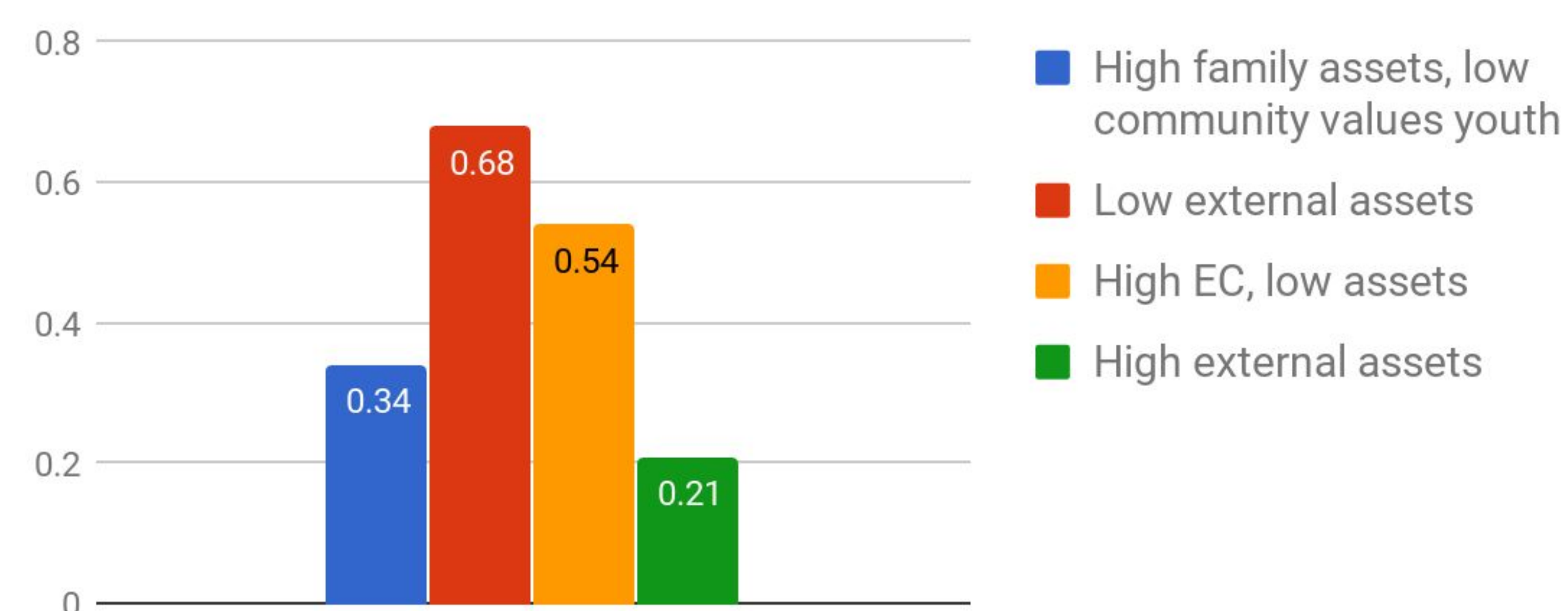


Figure 2. Proportion of youth who ever attempted suicide by class

Note. Wald tests revealed significant differences between all classes at or below  $p = .01$ .

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## Results

An LCA of these external asset measures was conducted in *Mplus*. Models were systematically tested starting with a one-class model, using common fit indices (i.e., BIC, AIC) to identify the best-fitting model (Collins & Lanza, 2010). The four-class model was selected (Figure 1).

Covariates were examined as predictors of class membership. Relative to the low assets class, bisexual girls and boys, and lesbian girls had higher odds of membership in the high assets classes. Youth with more educated parents, youth from urban areas, and Black youth had lower odds of membership in the high external assets class.

Finally, suicide attempts were examined by class (see Figure 2).

- The proportion of youth who had ever attempted suicide differed by class, with the highest proportion of youth in the low external assets class reporting ever attempting suicide ( $M = .68$ ), and the lowest proportion in the high external assets class ( $M = .21$ ).
- A relatively low proportion of youth had ever attempted suicide in the class characterized by high family assets ( $M = .34$ ). However, in the class characterized by high extracurricular activities the proportion was over half ( $M = .54$ ).

## Implications

Findings indicate that disparities exist in LGB youths' access to strong relationships and opportunities.

- It is troubling that nearly one-third of LGB youth in the sample experienced low levels of all external assets, and more than half of these youth had ever attempted suicide.
- Other than the high external asset class, no other class exhibited high caring school climate or feeling valued by the community.

No asset class was completely immune to suicide risk. However, the high external asset class reported the lowest risk for attempted suicide, while the low asset class showed the highest risk.

- LGB youth who report strong family relationships - and moderate or low levels of the other assets - reported the second lowest levels of attempted suicide.
- LGB youth who are drawn to extracurriculars, however, reported the second highest level of attempted suicide.
- More external assets appear to be protective against suicide attempts, although even in the high external asset class, around 1 in 5 LGB youth reported they had attempted suicide.
- Future research should examine how to promote external assets among LGB youth, in connection with minority stress processes.

