National Alliance to End Homelessness

INCIDENCE AND VULNERABILITY OF LGBTQ HOMELESS YOUTH

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- Incidence and prevalence of homelessness among LGBTQ youth
- Characteristics and risk elements for LGBTQ homeless youth
- Causes and experiences of homeless LGBTQ youth

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Introduction

Severe family conflict, abuse, neglect, and abandonment all contribute to family displacement and homelessness for lesbian,[1] gay,[2] bisexual,[3] transgender,[4] and queer/questioning[5] (LGBTQ) youth in America. This issue brief offers an overview of research indicating that each year hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ youth will experience homelessness.

LGBTQ youth are over-represented in the homeless youth population, but studies also indicate that this population experiences greater physical and sexual exploitation while homeless than their heterosexual peers. Unfortunately, most U.S. communities lack adequate programs and resources to prevent and end homelessness for LGBTQ youth. Once homeless, LGBTQ youth experience instability, abuse, and exploitation during a critical development stage. Without residential stability, nurturance, and opportunities for positive youth development, LGBTQ homeless youth are susceptible to further challenges as adults.

This brief reviews research concerning LGBTQ homeless youth and offers suggestions for interventions with positive outcomes for homeless adolescents and young adults.

Incidence of homelessness among unaccompanied, homeless youth in America

Homeless youth are typically defined as unaccompanied youth ages 12 to 24 years who do not have familial support and who are living in shelters, on the streets, in places not meant for human habitation (e.g. cars, abandoned buildings), or in others' homes for short periods under circumstances that make the situation highly unstable (also known as "couch surfing").

While most studies and community-based service providers agree that the population is substantial and widespread in every state and across demographic characteristics, there are not accurate figures on its size. The few research studies that quantify the number of homeless youth in America are incomplete. National studies typically focus only on minors (youth under 18 years) and have findings that vary from 575,000[6] to 1.6 million[7] or 1.7 million[8] to 2.8 million.[9] These estimates do not include 18 to 24 year olds who are homeless. Further, these incidence studies do not record the length of time the youth spent homeless. Some youth will remain homeless for only short periods of time (a few nights) while others will experience long periods of homelessness and become street-dependent.

In 1998, a large study of the adolescent population found that each year 5 percent (1.6 million) experienced one episode of homelessness.[10]

Prevalence of homeless LGBTQ youth

Reports, news articles, and anecdotal stories from nonprofit organizations serving homeless youth have long recorded the over-representation of LGBTQ youth among homeless adolescents.[11] Increasingly, studies on the demographics of unaccompanied homeless youth indicate alarming rates of over-representation of LGBTQ youth. LGBTQ youth are estimated to be 10 percent of the general youth population.[12] In contrast, research (Table 1) forms a cluster of findings that show 15 to 25 percent of homeless youth self-identify as LGBTQ. A conservative estimate would be that one out of every five (20 percent) of homeless youth are LGBTQ or twice the number of the general youth population. Thus, LGBTQ youth are disproportionately experiencing homelessness.

Extrapolating the cluster of research studies indicating that 15 to 25 percent of homeless youth self identify as LGBTQ to the research findings that 1.6 million youth under the age of 18 experience at least one episode of homelessness each year,[30] would result in an estimate that each year between 240,000 and 400,000 LGBTQ youth experience at least one night of homelessness in America.

There are however studies which do not indicate that LGBTQ youth are disproportionately represented among homeless youth (Table 2). One explanation for this variation is that these studies include primarily teenagers and not young adults. Additionally, if studies were shelter-based they might be missing LGBT youth who may not access shelter because they fear the environments are not inclusive or safe.

Causation and pathways to homelessness

Studies show that there are often multiple factors which cause both heterosexual and LGBTQ youth to become homeless: severe family conflict, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, substance abuse, mental health disabilities, abandonment, and rejection by parents and guardians due to the youth's sexual orientation or gender identity.[36] A multiplicity of family dynamics builds up forcing a youth out of her/his home.[37] For example, an eight city survey of homeless youth in 2005 found that 75 percent of LGB homeless youth and 63 percent of heterosexual homeless youth reported having family members with severe alcohol and drug problems.[38] Youth consistently report severe family conflict as the primary reason for their homelessness but also report multiple barriers to reunification.[39] Behavioral issues on the part of the youth may be a source of the conflict, but this is not always the case.

It is certainly true that a significant minority of LGBTQ youth report being thrown out of their homes due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. One survey noted that 25 percent of LGBT homeless youth report family rejection as the primary cause of their homelessness.[40] Another study of 63 LGB youth in four Midwestern states showed that 39 percent of gay males had left home due to a conflict regarding their sexuality.[41]

However, some studies indicate that familial rejection of sexual orientation or gender identity are not the primary cause of homelessness in a majority of case histories for LGBTQ youth.[42] In a survey of 84 LGB homeless youth in Seattle, 14 percent left home because of conflict with parents over their sexual orientation. And, in a state-wide survey of homeless youth in Minnesota, of the 11 percent of the homeless youth that self-identified as LGBT, 25 percent reported that primary reason they left home was intolerance in response to the youth's sexual orientation or gender identity.[43] Beyond the individual and family problems, youth homelessness is also fed by lack of affordable housing, poverty, and child welfare and juvenile correction systems that fail to protect youth from shelters and the streets.

TABLE 1. Research Indicating Over-Representation of LGBTQ Youth in the Homeless Youth Population			
STUDY AUTHOR	**LOCATION**	**AGE RANGE**	**PERCENTAGE OF HOMELESS YOUTH SELF-REPORTING AS LGBTQ**
Adlaf & Zdanowicz, 1999[13]	Toronto, Ontario, Canada	13 to 24 years	18 percent LGBQ
Clatts, 1998[14]	New York, NY	12 to 17 years	50 percent LGB
Cochran, 2002[15]	Seattle, WA	13 to 21 years	22 percent LGB
Johnson, 2005[16]	Illinois statewide	12 to 21 years	14.8 percent LGBQ City of Chicago: 23.1 percent Cook County: 22.4 percent
Kennedy, 1991[17]	San Francisco, CA	Does not specify	21 percent LGB
Kruks, 1991[18]	Los Angeles, CA and Seattle, WA	Does not specify	25 to 45 percent LGB
Milburn, 2006[19]	Los Angeles, CA Melbourne, Australia	Under 25 years	24 percent LGBT
Owen, 2006[20]	St. Paul, MN	Under 21 years	9-14 percent LGBT
Owen, 2003[21]	St. Paul, MN	Under 21 years	12-17 percent LGBQ
Rew, 2001[22]	Central Texas	15 to 22 years	36 percent LGB
Solorio, 2006[23]	Los Angeles, CA	12 to 20 years	25 percent LGBT
Tenner, 1998[24]	Seattle, WA	14 to 21 years	37 percent LGB
Unger, 1997[25]	Hollywood, CA	12 to 23 years	18 percent LGB
Van Leeuwen, 2006[26]	Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Utah	Under 25 years	22 percent LGB
Wagner, 2001[27]	Seattle, WA	13 to 23 years	39 percent LGBT
Whitbeck, 2004[28]	Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas	16 to 19 years	15 percent LGB
Yates, 1988[29]	Los Angeles, CA	12 to 24 years	16 percent LGB

LGBTQ homeless youth face greater harm than their heterosexual homeless peers

LGBTQ homeless youth run away more frequently and are exposed to greater victimization while on the streets than their heterosexual peers.[44] One study found that LGBT homeless youth ran away from home an average of twelve times as compared to seven times for heterosexual homeless youth.[45] Initially, before becoming homeless, LGBTQ homeless youth are exposed to higher levels of physical and sexual abuse from caretakers or family members.[46] Even if not homeless, in general, LGBTQ youth are at greater risk for substance abuse and suicide and they are at high risk for being both victims and perpetrators of physical violence compared to the general adolescent population.[47] Additionally, LGBTQ youth may face stigma, verbal harassment, high rates of sexual coercion, lack of support, homophobia, involvement in sex at an early age, and potential exposure to multiple partners.[48] Conversely, LGBTQ youth experience barriers to healthcare and mental health counseling.[49]

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TABLE 2. Research Indicating Under-Representation of LGBTQ Youth in the Homeless Youth Population			
STUDY AUTHOR	**LOCATION**	**AGE RANGE**	**PERCENTAGE OF HOMELESS YOUTH SELF-REPORTING AS LGBTQ**
Cauce, 2000[31]	Seattle, WA	13 to 21 years	7 percent LGBT
Greenblatt, 1993[32]	Los Angeles, CA	13 to 17 years	Less than 10 percent
Rotheram-Borus, 1992[33]	New York, NY	12 to 18 years	6 percent males GB
Rotheram-Borus, 1996[34]	New York, NY	11 to 18 years	7 percent had history of same-sex sexual activity
Whitbeck, 1999[35]	Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, and Kansas	16 to 20 years	4-5 percent LGB

Mental Health Risk: Once homeless, LGBTQ youth are at higher risk for victimization and experience higher incidence of mental health problems. A study of homeless lesbian and gay youth found that lesbians were more likely to experience post-traumatic stress syndrome, conduct disorder, and alcohol and substance abuse than heterosexual homeless young women. Gay homeless males are less likely to meet criteria for conduct disorder and alcohol abuse than their heterosexual homeless peers but were more likely to meet criteria for major depressive episodes.[50] LGB homeless youth are also more likely to attempt suicide (62 percent) than their heterosexual homeless peers (29 percent).[51]

Sexual Exploitation Risk: Another risk is the youth's exposure to sexual abuse and exploitation. LGBTQ homeless youth experience an average of 7.4 more acts of sexual violence than their heterosexual peers.[52] LGBTQ youth may have twice the rates of sexual victimization than their heterosexual homeless peers and LGBTQ youth report double the rates of sexual abuse before age 12.[53] LGB homeless youth are solicited to exchange sex for money, food, drugs, shelter, and clothing more often than heterosexual homeless youth.[54] Consequently, more LGB homeless youth than heterosexual homeless youth report engaging in the sex trade to meet their basic needs.[55]

Chemical Abuse Risk: Finally, LGBTQ homeless youth may be at greater risk for drug abuse. A Seattle, Washington study of 84 homeless LGB youth, found that they used substances more frequently than their heterosexual peers, with significant differences noted in the rate of consumption for cocaine, crack, and crystal methamphetamines. However, study results appear to highlight experimental drug usage and not drug dependency among homeless youth. The study revealed that the mean use of these substances by the youth in the preceding six month period was never more than 2 times for each drug.[56] At least one study has noted that amphetamine and injection drug use is more prevalent among LGBTQ youth than their straight peers.[57]

The role of foster care and juvenile delinquency systems as contributors to LGBTQ youth homelessness

The transition to adulthood for former foster or juvenile delinquency youth is often complicated by their experience with multiple placements and numerous disruptions to their schooling. One study found that more than 30 percent of foster youth experienced eight or more placements with foster families and group homes.[58] Court-involved youth (foster youth and youth in the juvenile justice system) are often discharged into communities with few resources and numerous challenges.[59] As a result, former foster care and

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incarcerated youth have difficulty finding employment and affordable housing and are disproportionately represented in the homeless youth population.

Foster Care Youth: Every year, about 20,000 youth ages 16 and older transition from foster care to legal emancipation, or "age out" of the system. There is little research on the number of LGBTQ youth in child welfare systems, but, some studies suggest that these youth make up between 5 and 10 percent of the total foster youth population.[60] The actual percentage may be higher since LGBTQ youth experience high rates of physical and sexual abuse histories, which puts them at risk for entry into child protective services and foster care.[61] One study found that LGB homeless youth were more likely to have a history of out-of-home placement than heterosexual homeless youth.[62] Additionally, a 2006 study found that 65 percent of 400 LGBT homeless youth reported having been in a child welfare placement in the past.[63]

A sizable minority of foster youth will experience at least one episode of homelessness after discharge. Studies indicate that from 12 to 36 percent of emancipated foster care youth (heterosexual and LGBTQ) report being homeless at least once after discharge from care.[64] Most episodes are short in duration. Even if not homeless, however, studies indicate foster youth in transition experience barriers to obtaining independent housing.[65]

Juvenile Justice Involved Youth: Every year, approximately 100,000 juveniles and young adults ages 10 to 24 years are released from secure correctional facilities and reenter their communities.[66] Studies indicate that close to 25 percent of formerly incarcerated youth will experience homelessness upon discharge from custodial placement.

Ending homelessness for LGBTQ youth through prevention, shelter, family reunification, and youth housing models

While there is a growing body of research on methodologies and services that prevent or end homelessness for youth, there is little research on interventions specifically for LGBTQ homeless youth. Given the absence of research on solutions specific to LGBTQ youth, the following recommendations are based on research for the general youth population. On the positive side, most homeless youth do not experience long-term homelessness. Homeless youth often go home, find relatives, or make it on their own as young adults. In a seven year longitudinal study of 249 homeless youth as compared to a matched sample of 149 housed youth, ages 13 and 17 years, most of the adolescents returned fairly quickly to their families of origin.[67] Nearly 93 percent were no longer homeless after seven years of study. However, not all were successfully reunified with parents. One third lived with their families, about one fifth lived with relatives or friends, and over a third (34 percent) lived on their own. Therefore, the pathway out of homelessness sometimes

Welcoming and Nurturing Environments as a Best Practice

LGBTQ homeless youth do not simply want to be tolerated. Tolerance is a negative form of acceptance. Youth understand and feel the difference between program services and agencies that tolerate versus nurture and celebrate them as persons. Programs serving LGBTQ homeless youth must recognize the prevalence of abuse, exploitation, neglect, abandonment, and conflict these youth have experienced in their families and communities. Merely tolerating their existence in a program often leads to barriers to building trusting relationships and engaging youth in opportunities for growth and change. Shelters, drop-in centers, housing models, counseling centers, and case advocates must consciously strive to exhibit behaviors, practices, and policies that nurture and celebrate LGBTQ homeless youth.

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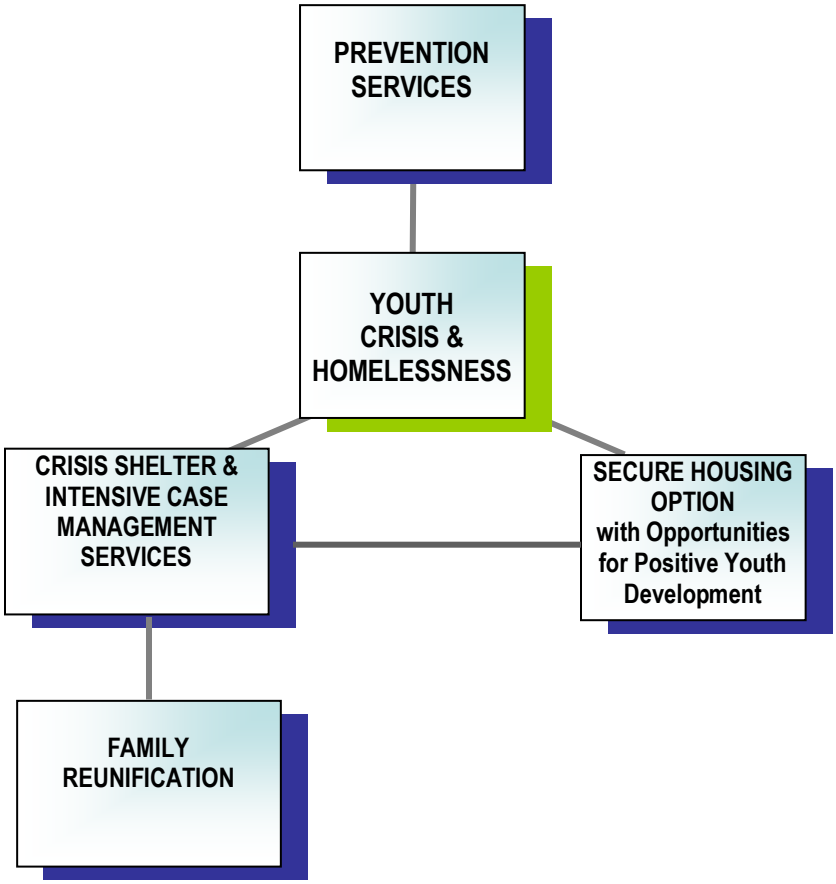
focuses on parents, sometimes focuses on kin and extended family, and sometimes focuses on independent living.

Community planners and youth service agencies should design service systems in three modules to have the greatest impact in ending youth homelessness: prevention and family preservation services, crisis emergency shelters with case managers seeking family reunification, and youth housing with positive youth development services.

Early Intervention and Prevention Services

Early intervention and prevention services can often meet the crisis needs of a family and prevent homelessness and/or foster care placement. Two forms of mental health services have been identified that show positive results in decreasing youth anti-social behavior and aggression: multi-systemic therapy (MST)[68] and functional family therapy (FFT).[69] These are delivered in a family context and help stabilize the family by dealing with the mental health issues of adults and/or youth. Additionally, youth who are experiencing abuse or neglect at home could be diverted away from costly out-of-home placements and homelessness through Family Group Conferencing or Family Group Decision Making programs. These program models allow extended family, kin, and important people in the life of the youth to come together to implement a plan for the continued safety, nurturance, and permanency of the youth. These programs show remarkable success in stabilizing youth. Research on Family Group Decision Making found reductions in re-abuse, increased family involvement, decreased residential instability, and more extended families accepting care of the youth.[70]



Shelter care coupled with intensive case management services to rapidly reunite homeless youth with their families

Emergency shelter coupled with case management services have proven effective at reuniting homeless youth – even those with troubled histories – with their families. Homeless youth and their families benefit from respite shelter that works to resolve conflict or crisis with counseling and supportive services. Intensive Case Management (ICM) programs work with a family (in conjunction with teachers and other helping professionals) to develop an individualized comprehensive service plan. Case Managers who are professional and specially trained conduct an assessment and assist in coordinating supports and services necessary to help children and adolescents live successfully at home and in the community. The case loads are small (1 to 10 or 1 to 12) and offer round-the-clock access. One study noted that homeless

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Cultural Proficiency to Serve LGBTQ Youth of Color

LGBTQ homeless youth may also disproportionately be youth of color. African American and American Indian youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless youth population. Further, homeless youth tend to come from low-income communities and their families are disproportionately poor or working class. It is recommended, therefore, that shelter, housing, and supportive services for LGBTQ homeless youth be staffed with professionals with skills and proficiencies to support youth from multiple cultures. The ability to identify with youth's ethnic culture and socio-economic culture, in addition to their sexual orientation and gender identity, may offer greater opportunities for relationship building and voluntary agreement by the youth to accept services.

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youth receiving ICM services showed improved psychological well-being, less aggression, and satisfaction with their quality of life.[71] Hopefully, these lead to more stable housing.

Housing programs for youth who will not be able to return to their families

Many LBGTQ homeless youth have been rejected or abandoned by their families. Some experience unresolved family issues that threaten their safety and welfare. When family reunification is not an option, communities must rely on housing programs designed for adolescents to prevent and end youth homelessness. Examples of youth housing models include: host homes, shared housing, community-based group homes, dormitories, scattered site transitional housing, single-site transitional housing, permanent scattered site housing with supportive services, and foyer (employment-focused) housing. At their best, these models incorporate life skills training, connection to caring adults, and opportunities for growth, mistakes, and positive youth development. Many LGBTQ homeless youth rely on such housing options when family members are unwilling or unable to care for them.

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The implication of these three strategies is that the first and best option is to reconnect youth with their families, and only after this fails should independent living options be considered.

CONCLUSION

A growing, but inadequate, body of research finds that between 240,000 and 400,000 LGBTQ youth experience at least one episode of homelessness each year in the United States. A review of research literature finds that not only is there a disproportionate representation of LGBTQ youth among homeless youth populations, but this population experiences greater physical and sexual exploitation while homeless than their heterosexual peers. Unfortunately, a national shortage of youth shelters and housing programs result in many youth being denied meaningful assistance. Local programs funded under the federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (Department of Health and Human Services) made contact with over 660,000 youth through street outreach services in 2007, but about 47,000 (less than 10 percent) actually received shelter or housing.[72] The lack of accessible housing resources is of grave concern for both heterosexual and LGBTQ homeless youth. The experiences of LGBTQ homeless youth with histories of familial abuse, homelessness, and exploitation in street environments occur during a critical human developmental stage – adolescence – setting them up for further challenges as adults.

Several intervention models provide hope: early intervention and prevention services, intensive case management services coupled with shelter centers, and youth housing models with youth development services. Lack of federal, state, and local funding is a primary barrier to communities wishing to address the needs of LGBTQ homeless youth. Broader community recognition of

the problem in the adult LGBTQ community and support for it's solution could make a difference. Homelessness among LGBTQ youth can be abated. Greater understanding of this special population and tailor-made interventions offer American communities the opportunity to dedicate resources that offer promise in preventing and ending youth homelessness.

Endnotes:

1. A lesbian is a woman whose emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions are primarily for other women.
2. A gay person is a person whose emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions are primarily for individuals of the same sex, typically in reference to men. In some contexts, the word gay is used as a general or unifying term for gay men and lesbians.
3. A bisexual is a person who is emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to both men and women.
4. Transgender is an umbrella term that can be used to describe people whose gender expression is non-conforming and/or whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex at birth. This term can include transsexuals, gender queers, cross-dressers, and others whose gender expression varies from traditional gender norms.
5. The word queer was a historically derogatory term for a gay man, lesbian, or gender-nonconforming person. The term has been widely reclaimed, especially by younger LGBT people, as a positive social and political identity. It is sometimes used as an inclusive, or umbrella, term for all LGBT people. More recently, *queer* has become common as a term of self-identification for people who do not identify with the restrictive and binary terms that have traditionally described sexual orientation (for instance, gay, lesbian, or bisexual only). Some LGBT community members still find *queer* an offensive or problematic term. The term questioning youth is used for those individuals in an active process of exploring their own sexual orientation and/or gender identity and questions the cultural assumptions that they are heterosexual and/or gender conforming. Many LGBT people go through this process before "coming out." Not all people who question their identities end up self-identifying as LGBT.
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