



Seeking Shelter

The Experiences and Unmet Needs of LGBT Homeless Youth

Andrew Cray, Katie Miller, and Laura E. Durso September 2013

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

In 2010, the Center for American Progress issued a landmark report on homelessness among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, youth. “On the Streets: The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth” explored the drivers of homelessness among LGBT youth, the experiences they have on the street, and proposed federal interventions that could help address the epidemic of homelessness among LGBT children and young adults. Our goal here is to update that report, so we began with the same assumption as the original authors three years ago: Every child deserves a supportive and loving home. Unfortunately, our findings indicate that this is still not the reality for too many LGBT youth across the United States.

Over the past several years, there has been an increase in robust data collection from cities in all corners of the United States on the experiences of homeless youth, and many of these surveys and studies have observed and described the disparities experienced by LGBT youth in shelters and on the streets. There are also new service providers who have stepped up to serve vulnerable LGBT youth and help make their lives healthier, happier, and more stable. And more LGBT young people and adults who experienced homelessness as youth have come forward with bravery and candor to tell their stories. These new developments are encouraging, and help paint a more detailed picture of who LGBT homeless youth are and how they ended up out of their homes and separated from their families.

But LGBT youth continue to be disproportionately represented among homeless youth in our country, and their experiences of homelessness continue to be characterized by violence, discrimination, poor health, and unmet needs. Family rejection, harassment in schools, and the shortcomings of juvenile justice and child welfare continue to drive these elevated rates of homelessness. And all the while, federal funding for essential services to the well-being of these youth has remained stagnant. There is much more work to be done.

In this report, we once again explore who LGBT homeless youth are, how they become homeless, how their needs are being addressed, and what the federal government can do to eliminate homelessness among LGBT youth. In particular, we stress the following policy priorities that can assist in preventing homelessness among LGBT youth and change their lives for the better:

- Reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act with LGBT-specific provisions.
- Establish standards that protect LGBT youth from bullying and harassment in schools.
- Support initiatives that strengthen families with LGBT children, and that promote acceptance and understanding between parents and children.
- Disassemble the school-to-prison pipeline.
- Initiate efforts to research LGBT youth homelessness and track demographic data on homeless youth that includes sexual orientation and gender identity.

These five policy recommendations would bolster the efforts of service providers around the country, creating a comprehensive framework to address the challenges in building effective homeless-service programs. No policy, program, or study will eliminate LGBT youth homelessness today, in a month, or even in a year. But developing a cohesive federal approach to this pressing issue is a necessary step toward giving all youth safe homes and brighter futures.

Background: Youth homelessness in the United States

Overall homeless youth demographics

Far too many children and young adults in the United States face the crisis of homelessness. While the definition of “homelessness” is multifaceted—referring to experiences as varied as living in a place not meant for human habitation to a lack of stable housing in the form of a lease or owned home¹—the classification of “homeless youth” commonly refers to unaccompanied young people between the ages of 12 and 24 for whom it is not possible to safely live with a relative or in another safe alternative living arrangement.² Among these homeless youth are those who have left home willingly and without their family’s knowledge—“runaway” youth—and those who have left home against their will, at the hands of their guardians—“throwaway” youth.³

A lack of adequate data collection on homeless individuals of all ages makes it difficult to precisely measure the scale of the problem of youth homelessness, but population estimates paint a disconcerting picture. The most common estimate of homeless minors in the United States is 1.7 million, a figure derived from the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children.⁴ Homeless youth between the ages of 18 and 24 are a less-studied population, but it is estimated that between 750,000 and 2 million young adults experience homelessness each year.⁵ This means that somewhere between 2.4 million and 3.7 million children and young adults are without safe and stable housing every year.

Demographic information on homeless youth also varies. While some studies—particularly those focusing on homeless youth living on the street—find a disproportionate number of homeless boys and young men,⁶ other studies have found a roughly even proportion of male and female youth.⁷ There have also been contradictory findings with respect to race and ethnicity. A number of studies have found that homeless youth populations tend to reflect the ethnic and racial composition of the surrounding community,⁸ while others have found an overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minority youth.⁹

The duration of homelessness varies significantly, and the risks faced by youth increases with the length of the episode of homelessness. According to the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children, while more than 99 percent of homeless youth under age 18 eventually return home, approximately 380,000 remain away from home for more than one week, and 131,000 are homeless for more than one month.¹⁰

A population at risk: LGBT homeless youth

One subpopulation that is consistently overrepresented among homeless youth is LGBT youth. Among the general population of youth in the United States, between 5 percent and 7 percent identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender.¹¹ But compared to this relatively small portion of the overall population, LGBT youth are vastly overrepresented among the homeless youth population. While data on the sexual orientation and gender identity of homeless youth are not universally collected, several state and local studies from across the United States have found shockingly disproportionate rates of homelessness among LGBT youth compared to non-LGBT youth. Estimates of homeless youth using interviews or surveys of homeless populations at the state and local level suggest that between 9 percent and 45 percent of these youth are LGBT.¹² Population-based studies also indicate that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are more likely to be homeless than their peers. Based on data from the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey from 2005 to 2007, researchers found that LGB youth were more likely to be homeless than heterosexual youth without same-sex sexual partners, and this relationship between sexual orientation and homelessness was stable when accounting for age, race, ethnicity, and immigration status.¹³

TABLE 1
Homelessness among LGBT youth

Location	Identity characteristic(s)	Estimated percent- age of the homeless population	Age range of youth in study	Study author and date
East Coast				
New York, New York	LGB (sexual orientation only)	50 percent	12 to 17 years	Clatts, 1998 ¹⁴
New York, New York	LGBT (sexual orientation and gender identity)	33 percent (18 percent gay or lesbian; 10 percent bisexual; and 5 percent transgender)	Under 24 years	Freeman and Hamilton, 2008 ¹⁵
Midwest and Mountain West				
St. Paul, Minnesota	LGBT (sexual orientation and gender identity)	9 percent to 14 percent	Under 21 years	Owen, 2006 ¹⁶
Chicago, Illinois	LGBQ (sexual orientation only)	22.4 percent	12 to 21 years	Johnson, 2005 ¹⁷
Illinois	LGBQ (sexual orientation only)	14.8 percent	12 to 21 years	Johnson, 2005 ¹⁸
Iowa; Missouri; and Kansas	LGB (sexual orientation only)	15 percent	16 to 19 years	Whitbeck, 2004 ¹⁹
Colorado; Illinois; Minnesota; Missouri; and Utah	LGB (sexual orientation only)	22 percent	Under 25 years	Van Leeuwen, 2006 ²⁰
West Coast				
Seattle, Washington	LGB (sexual orientation only)	22 percent	13 to 21 years	Cochran, 2002 ²¹
Seattle, Washington	LGBT (sexual orientation and gender identity)	39 percent	13 to 23 years	Wagner, 2001 ²²
Los Angeles, California	LGBT (sexual orientation and gender identity)	25 percent	12 to 20 years	Solorio, 2006 ²³
Hollywood, California	LGBT (sexual orientation and gender identity)	45 percent	Under 25 years	Rabinovitz et al., 2010 ²⁴

Reports from service providers across the country support evidence of this disparity. A recent nationwide LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey of 354 organizations serving homeless youth approximates that LGBT youth comprise, on average, 40 percent of the agencies' clients.²⁵ Notably, nearly a third of these service providers use staff estimates to approximate the number of LGBT youth they serve, while not always systematically collecting information about sexual orientation and gender identity from the youth themselves.²⁶ Given that many youth may not be willing to self-identify their sexual orientation or gender identity when seeking services and that staff perceptions of youths' identities are imperfect measurement tools, all of these data may actually *underestimate* the proportion of LGBT youth who are homeless or being served by homeless youth providers.

Racial diversity among LGBT homeless youth

Few studies explore the racial diversity of LGBT homeless youth, but those that have suggest that LGBT homeless youth are disproportionately people of color. Studies that have focused on self-reported race demographics among LGBT youth are limited, but a 2007 survey of homeless youth in New York City found that approximately 28 percent of surveyed black youth and 31 percent of Hispanic youth identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.²⁷ Put another way, 44 percent of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in the survey also indicated that they are black, and 26 percent indicated that they are Hispanic.²⁸ The survey also found that approximately 7 percent of black homeless youth and slightly more than 4 percent of Hispanic homeless youth identified as transgender.²⁹ This works out to roughly 62 percent of the transgender survey respondents indicating they were black, and 20 percent indicating they were Hispanic.³⁰ This breakdown suggests that youth of color identify as LGBT at average or slightly higher rates compared to other racial subpopulations of New York City's homeless youth.³¹

Service providers who work specifically with LGBT youth also report serving a greater number of youth of color, suggesting that—at the very least—homeless youth of color are present in LGBT-specific programs at higher rates. For example, the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit reports that approximately 99 percent of their youth clients are African American.³² Additionally, from 2000 to 2005, Green Chimneys Triangle Tribe Apartments, a transitional living program, or TLP, for LGBT youth in New York City, reported a youth client population that was 44 percent Latino or Hispanic, 36 percent black or African American, and 10 percent white or Caucasian.³³

Regional differences in the percentage of LGBT homeless youth

As the data above illustrate, there may be regional differences in the representation of LGBT youth among homeless youth populations in the United States. Patterns in the data suggest that in Midwestern states, there is a slightly lower percentage of homeless youth who identify as LGBT compared to other regions in the country. In the Midwest, between 10 percent and 25 percent of homeless youth identify as LGBT, compared to studies focused on the East and West Coasts, which found that roughly 25 percent to 50 percent of the population identify as LGBT.³⁴

The regional differences in rates of LGBT identification among homeless youth may indicate particular behaviors. It is possible that homeless LGBT youth migrate to the coasts to seek more accepting communities or places where there are greater legal protections or programmatic options to serve LGBT communities. This behavior is in line with studies finding that significant numbers of homeless people may be temporarily residing in a state other than the state where they became homeless. In San Francisco, one study found that 40 percent of the city's homeless population became homeless in a city other than San Francisco and that 15 percent were from a state other than California.³⁵ Another study focusing on Hollywood found that more than one-quarter of the homeless youth population were from outside of California.³⁶

It is also possible that the studies reflect a shortcoming in research and data collection on LGBT youth homelessness. All but one of the studies focused on the Midwest only measured the sexual orientation of homeless youth, omitting questions that would identify the percentage of homeless youth who identified as transgender.³⁷ It could be that even among LGBT homeless youth, transgender youth are disproportionately represented—so much so that they would account for 15 percent or more of homeless youth. Data from the West Coast support this hypothesis. Two studies conducted in Seattle and released one year apart found that 22 percent of the homeless youth population ages 13 to 21 identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, but that 39 percent of youth ages 13 to 23 identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.³⁸ While the population of homeless young adults ages 21 to 23 may also include a disproportionate number of LGBT young adults, the 17 percent difference between these two studies may also be suggestive of significant numbers of transgender youth who are homeless across regions.

Regardless of the explanation for these regional differences, it is clear that LGBT young people are disproportionately represented among homeless youth populations across the country. LGBT homeless youth are seeking services and attempting to survive in states as diverse as California and Missouri, meaning that regardless of a state's climate toward LGBT people at large, there will be youth who need supportive services that accept their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Duration of homelessness among LGBT youth

Once LGBT youth have been separated from their families, they also experience longer periods of separation—and thus, possibly longer periods of homelessness—than their non-LGBT peers. Data from New York City show that the average period of time away from family among homeless youth is 26 months,³⁹ but among lesbian, gay, and bisexual homeless youth, the average is slightly longer—29 months—although the median time away from home of one year is in line with the general population.⁴⁰ For transgender youth, the duration of familial separation jumps significantly. Transgender homeless youth reported an average period of separation from their parents or guardians of 52 months, with a median duration of 30 months.⁴¹ These data suggest that once LGBT youth have fled their homes or experienced rejection by their families, they have to survive on their own for a longer period of time, multiplying the risks and hardships they face without the safety and support of a stable home.

How did we get here? Drivers of LGBT youth homelessness

There is little ambiguity in the data: LGBT youth are disproportionately represented among the population of homeless children and young adults in the United States. But the explanation for this disparity is less obvious. Why is it that LGBT young people are more likely to not have a safe and stable place to stay?

Unfortunately, a good deal of information suggests that LGBT youth experience higher rates of homelessness precisely because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Youth are coming out to their families at younger ages, and all too often are being met with family rejection or abusive responses that force them out of their homes. These youth are also vulnerable in foster care, schools, and juvenile justice facilities; the social safety nets intended to help them improve their lives as they enter adulthood drive them into the streets. The tragic consequence of these problems is that LGBT youth—when they are at a critical stage in their development—are left without safe and supportive homes.

Youth coming out as LGBT

Many LGBT youth feel that the process of coming out and sharing openly in their identity is the start to a path of empowerment, personal growth, and acceptance—or a cathartic experience of shedding a “secret” they felt they had to hide from loved ones. With this framework of self-acceptance and growth as context, it is an encouraging and positive development that the average age of coming out has dropped significantly over the past several decades,⁴² suggesting that youth are becoming aware of—and are comfortable sharing—their identities at a younger age. Research conducted by the Family Acceptance Project from 2003 to 2005 found that the average age of self-identification as lesbian, gay, or bisexual was slightly more than 13 years old.⁴³ These data, however, were limited; they only examined sexual orientation and did not include gender identity.

There is much less information about transgender youths’ experiences of coming out—particularly minors. The nation’s largest survey of transgender adults,

conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, sheds some light on the coming-out process for some transgender children and younger adults. The survey found that 29 percent of respondents indicated that they expressed a transgender or gender-nonconforming identity while attending K-12 school,⁴⁴ which suggests that to some degree, more than a quarter of transgender people were “out” about their gender identity before they turned 18. The number of young adults who were “out” while attending an educational institution from the ages of 18 to 24 jumps significantly—up to 73 percent.⁴⁵ These data tell an incomplete story about the coming-out experience, but are somewhat supplemented by information about when transgender respondents began their gender transition—the process of beginning to live in a different gender from the one they were assigned at birth. Twenty-three percent of transgender women and 54 percent of transgender men reported beginning their transition before age 25.⁴⁶ On the whole, the story these data tell is that many transgender youth openly express their gender identity or are gender nonconforming during a time when they are likely to be dependent upon their families, schools, and/or youth-focused institutions for their support and safety.

Fitting with this contextual narrative of coming out, many researchers find that sharing one’s identity with their family may lead to positive relationship outcomes,⁴⁷ and many LGBT youth are met with welcoming and loving families and community social structures that foster their identities and help them grow. This is not the reality, however, for many youth. In fact, the most common reasons that LGBT homeless youth cite for being out of their homes are family rejection and conflict.

Tony’s story⁴⁸

Tony is 21 years old, but came out to his family when he was 19. He did not get a lot of support from his parents once they found out that he was gay. Eventually, he found himself looking for a place to live. When he recently returned to central Florida, he lived with his aunt until she asked him to leave a couple months ago.

Tony was alone, without a job, and homeless and hungry. He did not know what to do or where to turn until a friend told him about the Zebra Coalition and he was hopeful after reading more about the organization on its website. Through the Zebra Coalition, he has been able to utilize many of the services and programs that are

provided by the more than 20 coalition partners to meet his basic needs for food, clothing, hygiene, and medical care. He was also provided with assistance to get him on the path toward a college education, and has even started to volunteer in order to gain job-related skills to add to his resume.

Tony now looks forward to his frequent visits to the Zebra Coalition House, a drop-in center located in the Mills 50 district of Orlando that also serves as a safe and supportive environment for LGBT+⁴⁹ youth. Tony says that he is finally starting to feel settled, and that being around other youth who are going through similar situations has created strong bonds of friendship and support. He feels that he is on the path to feeling more secure and confident as he strives to create a better life for himself.

Multiple studies confirm that family rejection based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity is a significant driver behind LGBT youth homelessness. The California Homeless Youth Project estimates that 25 percent to 40 percent of LGBT homeless youth leave home due to conflicts with family members because of their identity.⁵⁰ Similarly, the LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey identified family rejection as one of the top reasons why LGBT youth were believed to be homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless. Forty-six percent of providers indicated that youth had “[run] away” from home because of family rejection based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, and 43 percent indicated that youth were “forced out” by their parents because of sexual orientation or gender identity.⁵¹ The next most commonly cited reason was physical, emotional, or sexual abuse at home—though it was not specified whether this abuse was related to the LGBT status of the youth.⁵²

LGBT youth also seem to believe they have little agency or option to remain in their homes when there is family tension. A study conducted by the National Runaway Safeline—formerly known as the National Runaway Switchboard—notes that for some LGBT youth, lack of parental acceptance leads to youth being thrown out of their homes; others may initially remain in their homes, but the difficulties and conflict they face because of lack of acceptance are so severe that they run away.⁵³ Interestingly, the results indicate that although LGBT youth are less likely to state that they were “thrown out” than non-LGBT youth—at rates of 39.4 percent versus 54 percent—LGBT youth are significantly less likely to say that the label “runaway” applies to them, at 18.2 percent

versus 44 percent.⁵⁴ This may suggest that although LGBT youth are not forcibly removed from their homes, lack of acceptance or hostility in the home leave them feeling that they have no choice but to leave.

Juvenile justice and social safety net systems are failing LGBT youth

LGBT youth may enter juvenile justice or social safety net programs for many of the same reasons as their non-LGBT peers, such as abuse or neglect at the hands of their parents or incarceration due to criminal activities. LGBT youth, however, are often unfairly and disproportionately driven into these systems precisely because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. According to one study on familial reactions to LGBT children, 42 percent of LGBT youth who were in child welfare or institutional systems were there because of family rejection or because they were *removed* from their homes due to conflict with their families over their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁵⁵ Family rejection and involvement in juvenile justice systems are undeniably intertwined. The relationship between the two is so close that the Equity Project, a coalition of organizations working to ensure that LGBT youth in the juvenile justice system are treated with dignity and fairness, has stated that leaving home because of family rejection is “the greatest predictor of future involvement with the juvenile justice system for LGBT youth.”⁵⁶ This is in part because running away from home is often a status offense that triggers judicial intervention.⁵⁷

The close relationship between juvenile justice systems, child welfare programs, and homelessness is confirmed by the experience of service providers addressing the needs of LGBT homeless youth. According to these providers, approximately one-third of LGBT homeless youth clients have been in foster care, and the same number have had contact with the juvenile justice system.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, these systems, which are intended to protect youth and improve their prospects for healthier futures, may ultimately drive LGBT youth into homelessness. Too often, programs meant to house youth lack sensitivity toward the needs of LGBT young people, whether due to institutional prejudice, lack of cultural competency among providers or foster parents, or blatant discrimination against LGBT youth by their peers or adult caretakers.⁵⁹ As a result, many of these youth run away from their housing placements to avoid unfair treatment or to escape abuse or harassment based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁶⁰

Entanglement with the justice system may also harm the ability of LGBT youth to find housing when they attempt to live on their own. LGBT youth in the justice system are at increased risk of being labeled as sex offenders, even if they have not actually committed a sexually based crime.⁶¹ This is because LGBT youth are “more likely to be prosecuted for age-appropriate consensual sexual activity” than their non-LGBT peers.⁶² In 29 states, youth who are convicted of these crimes are required to register as sex offenders.⁶³ This not only makes it harder for these youth to find employment—which may drive them into poverty and potentially homelessness—but also introduces the added difficulty of navigating laws, regulations, and social mores that serve as barriers to finding housing as a registered sex offender.⁶⁴

Even where child welfare or juvenile justice programs serve LGBT youth fairly, however, they may still face challenges in finding housing when they reach the age of emancipation, or “age out” of the system. Between 12 percent and 36 percent of emancipated youth report that they have experienced homelessness after aging out of the system.⁶⁵ Young people who are no longer eligible for housing through foster care systems are often left without adequate resources to transition into living on their own and face limited prospects for housing assistance. Unfortunately, young adults who age out of public systems may also have long-term consequences for this lack of support; as many as 30 percent of the nation’s population of homeless adults have histories in foster care.⁶⁶

Furthermore, the relationship between interaction with justice system institutions and homelessness may be cyclical. Research has shown that LGBT youth who enter the juvenile justice system are twice as likely to have experienced homelessness than other youth.⁶⁷ One cause for these overlaps may be that incarceration and involvement in juvenile justice systems for these youth is caused by the criminalization of homelessness itself,⁶⁸ particularly given the recent rise of laws and ordinances criminalizing activities ranging from loitering to lying in public spaces.⁶⁹ LGBT homeless youth may thus be both driven into homelessness because of their relationship to juvenile justice and child welfare institutions, and are driven back into these systems due to their lack of housing—creating a cycle that is difficult to break.

Experiences of LGBT homeless youth

Whatever has driven them into homelessness, LGBT youth on the street or in shelters face incredible obstacles to living healthy and successful lives. LGBT children and young adults without stable housing often struggle to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, and safety. The risk of victimization for these youth is high, and those who are able to stay safe still face significant barriers to health and wellness. LGBT homeless youth may also face increased encounters with the criminal justice system and lack of access to education and employment opportunities.

Struggling to survive: Meeting basic needs is a challenge for many LGBT homeless youth

The urgency of finding shelter—one of the most basic human needs—is greatest for vulnerable youth with no predictable place to spend the night. While many may think that homeless youth would be first in line to be served by shelter systems, studies make it clear that youth often have difficulty finding a bed. For example, a report from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in 2006 said that in all of New York City—which has a homeless youth population of nearly 4,000⁷⁰—there were less than 450 transitional living beds available.⁷¹ In a study of homeless youth in Hollywood, a quarter of surveyed youth reported that they had spent the previous night in a place that was not fit for human habitation, such as a street, squat, alley, or transportation station,⁷² and approximately half had spent the night in such locations in the previous 30 days.⁷³

In many places, shelter beds may be available to youth, but there are other significant barriers to accessing the shelter system. In one survey, half of the youth surveyed were afraid to access services because they were uncertain whether they would be turned over to the police, their parents, or to child and family services if they attempted to get help⁷⁴—an unwanted and potentially dangerous prospect for youth who are more likely to have had conflict in their homes or negative interactions with justice or child-welfare systems. Furthermore, in some places such as

Chicago, youth must report to the police before certain shelters will accept them.⁷⁵ The police are also often a primary source of information about shelter services, and only 15 percent of youth report finding their way to a shelter on their own.⁷⁶

Survival for homeless youth means more than just a place to sleep at night. Youth need access to food, hygiene items, clothing, and economic security to get off the streets or out of shelters. Among the general population of homeless youth, these needs are often met by turning to friends and relatives for assistance with basic necessities. As many as 73 percent of youth relied on extended family or friends for support while they were out of home, and only 10 percent relied on shelters for similar assistance.⁷⁷ But for LGBT homeless youth, who are less likely to have access to familial support, this kind of care may not be available, and they are much more likely to be self-reliant for meeting their needs.

A very small group of youth on the streets is able to secure traditional employment. Slightly more than 10 percent of street youth and slightly less than 10 percent of youth in shelters have found a job.⁷⁸ Many youth describe difficulty in securing employment because of their previous juvenile or criminal records,⁷⁹ and the increased involvement in juvenile justice systems⁸⁰ indicates that LGBT homeless youth are more likely to encounter this type of difficulty. So, like many other youth trying to survive, they may be forced into underground economies, meeting their basic needs through panhandling, selling drugs, or theft.⁸¹ Youth who are outside of the shelter system are particularly likely to engage in “street hustling” such as panhandling; more than half of street youth engage in panhandling, compared to only 10 percent of youth in shelters.⁸²

Many LGBT youth are forced to turn to particularly high-risk activity in order to survive. Surveys have found that LGBT youth are more than three times as likely to have engaged in survival sex.⁸³ In Hollywood, 41 percent of LGBT youth had engaged in survival sex during their lives, compared to 12 percent of the general population of homeless youth.⁸⁴ Among homeless youth as a whole, shelter is the number one commodity traded in return for sexual activity—an exchange that is likely indicative of the experience of LGBT youth as well.⁸⁵ Engaging in sex as a means of survival increases exposure to potential trauma for these youth, and increases their vulnerability to violence, rape, and exposure to disease.

High rates of victimization and criminalization

Due in part to difficulty finding safe shelter and a means of survival, LGBT homeless youth experience extremely high rates of victimization and criminalization, meaning their lives and futures are put at risk. The violence and trauma faced by LGBT homeless youth is shocking. Figures from research on the experiences of homeless youth in Hollywood are illustrative:⁸⁶

- Nearly 30 percent of LGBT youth had been robbed, compared to 21 percent of other youth.
- Twenty-eight percent of LGBT youth had been physically assaulted, compared to 18 percent of other youth.
- Twenty-two percent of LGBT youth had been sexually assaulted or raped—more than three times the rate among other homeless youth.
- One in three LGBT homeless youth had been a victim of a hate crime due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Exploitation of vulnerable LGBT homeless youth is another cause for alarm. The experiences of LGBT youth who are out of home align with traditional risk factors for sex trafficking, including prior childhood sexual abuse, lack of supportive adult figures, lack of education, and lack of means to earn an income.⁸⁷ Survey data indicate that young men who had sex with men—including gay and bisexual youth—are more likely to have been forced into prostitution than other youth.⁸⁸

In addition to being victimized and exploited, LGBT youth also experience more frequent, and sometimes more hostile encounters with police, potentially fueling distrust of authorities who are supposed to help them. More LGBT youth indicate they have faced police harassment than other youth, with nearly half of LGBT youth having such an experience.⁸⁹ Because LGBT youth are more likely to resort to criminal behavior to survive, they are also at greater risk of arrest,⁹⁰ but LGBT homeless youth also face elevated risk of detainment for crimes related to being homeless, such as curfew violations and sleeping in public spaces, fueling the cycle that perpetuates homelessness.⁹¹

Sassafras Lowrey's story⁹²

Sassafras Lowrey got hir start writing as a punk zinester in Portland, Oregon. Ze is the editor of the two-time American Library Association honored & Lambda Literary Finalist Kicked Out anthology, and Leather Ever After. Hir debut novel, Roving Pack—www.RovingPack.com—was honored by the American Library Association and chronicles the underground lives of gender-radical queer youth searching for identity, community, and belonging. Sassafras is also the 2013 winner of the Lambda Literary Foundation's Dr. Betty Berzon Emerging Writer Award. Sassafras shared hir story for this report:

I am alive today because I ran away, because I was then abandoned by the “safe” adults who I'd run to. I was raised to never get away. I was raised to remain forever my mother's play thing. It's been 13 years since I walked out her door the final time. Thirteen years since we stood in the same room, and still I know she's searching for me, sending me letters about how I could “come home” how I could lead a “normal” life. I am the child of alcohol and rage. I am the recipient of wandering fingers, of broken promises, black eyes, and manipulation. I came out at 17. At 17, I ran away. I was a “good kid”—I followed all the rules, learned to keep myself safe(ish) by reading the bloodshot lines in my mother's eyes like a map. Being gay was the most defiant thing I had ever done. I was tried and convicted before my first kiss. I used the police to run away because I knew if I went on my own my mother would hunt me down and I would never have a chance to run again. I spent hours in the police station, the whirr of the Polaroid camera documenting the bruises I'd become an expert at hiding.

The adult friends I ran away to asked “if I was over that whole gay thing”—they read my journal, called my bluff. When I was kicked out, my semi-rural high school told me they had never had to handle a homeless teenager, when they told me they didn't know what to do. Parents called the school guidance counselor to say I was “leading their kids down a path to hell,” when the school made it clear there was nothing I could do. I had no idea that I was part of an epidemic of homeless queer kids. Three days after I was kicked out I went to the public library and looked at every book that was shelved under “homosexuality.” I was searching for hope, for home. I didn't know which friend's family would take pity and let me sleep on their couch that night, or what I would eat for dinner. I'd never met another teenage lesbian. There was nothing on those library shelves that resembled my life. Sitting on the floor of that old library I promised myself that if I survived, I would write a book so that no other queer kid would feel as alone as I felt that day.

A few weeks later, I rode busses for two hours to get to the city of Portland. I held my breath and walked into the queer youth center for the first time. It was all concrete, spray paint, bike parts, glitter, and BO, but for the first time I knew that I wasn't alone. I learned the beginnings of trust from other kids who had lost everything. We swore allegiances to one another, built families in the back rooms of that youth center, in parks, under bridges, in punk houses. We kept the promises we made. We grew each other up, saving one another in ways no adults, no social workers or agencies ever could. My story is not unusual or unique with the exception of that I survived. We are the children of dysfunction, the product of families who don't want us, but we built our own queer families generation after queer generation. Don't tell us you don't understand how a parent could kick their child out. Don't tell us about how you don't understand that the streets and borrowed couches could feel safer than a childhood bedroom. Listen when we tell you our stories.

I survived because of the queer family that I created. I believe that the most radical thing we can do in a world that doesn't want us is to build family, to create new lives, our own families. Stonewall was a riot of homeless queer youth, and this is our queer legacy.

LGBT homeless youth face severe and life-threatening health disparities

As a consequence of family rejection, homelessness, and pervasive discrimination, LGBT youth who are homeless are at greater risk for poor health outcomes compared to their non-LGBT peers. Studies have found health disparities in several areas, including substance use, mental health problems, and suicidality.

The LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey found that 53 percent of youth served by these providers have histories of alcohol and substance use.⁹³ This number reflects two co-occurring issues faced by LGBT homeless youth. First, compared to their peers with safe and stable housing, homeless youth are at increased risk for dependency on drugs or alcohol.⁹⁴ Second, among homeless youth, those who are LGBT are at greater risk for drug and alcohol abuse. A 2006 study comparing data across eight cities found that 42 percent of gay homeless youth abuse alcohol compared to 27 percent of heterosexual youth.⁹⁵ The same study also found that intravenous drug use was more common for gay homeless youth than

their heterosexual peers.⁹⁶ These findings are confirmed by a more recent survey of homeless youth in Hollywood, which found that LGBT youth were more likely to have used hard drugs, such as cocaine, heroin, or methamphetamine in the last year.⁹⁷ While drug use—particularly the use of drugs such as injectable heroin—can be a risk factor for transmission of diseases such as HIV or Hepatitis-C, there is also evidence that LGBT youth are not engaging in higher-risk drug-use behaviors such as sharing needles.⁹⁸ LGBT youth are also more likely to seek out substance-abuse treatment to address these difficulties.⁹⁹

Poor mental health is also a particular concern for LGBT homeless youth. The LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey found that nearly two-thirds of LGBT youth clients had a history of mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety.¹⁰⁰ Compared to their non-LGBT homeless peers, they are twice as likely to report a diagnosis of bipolar disorder; in one survey, 23 percent reported such a diagnosis.¹⁰¹ Some studies have also found significantly higher rates of depression and post-traumatic stress disorders among LGBT homeless youth,¹⁰² though other studies found no statistically significant difference compared to non-LGBT homeless youth.¹⁰³

Finally, LGBT homeless youth—like other LGBT youth—are at high risk for suicide. Among the general population of youth, research overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that LGBT youth are at an increased risk for suicidal ideation and completion relative to their non-LGBT peers.¹⁰⁴ Though there is no agreed-upon percentage of the number of LGBT youth who have attempted suicide, an overview of studies suggests that between 25 percent and 50 percent of LGBT youth have attempted suicide at least once.¹⁰⁵ Research also suggests that LGBT homeless youth experience high rates of suicidal ideation and attempt. Seventy-three percent of gay and lesbian homeless youth report suicidal ideation, compared to 53 percent of their heterosexual peers, and 57 percent have attempted suicide compared to 33 percent of non-lesbian or gay homeless youth.¹⁰⁶ There has been less comparative research that includes samples of transgender homeless youth. Research on the transgender population as a whole, however, suggests that the high rates of these behaviors observed among LGB youth holds true for transgender homeless youth as well. A national survey of transgender adults found that 45 percent of transgender young adults from ages 18 to 24 have attempted suicide at some time in their lives.¹⁰⁷ Family rejection is correlated with increased rates of suicidal attempt; 32 percent of transgender respondents who experience acceptance from their families reported that they had attempted suicide, compared with 51 percent of respondents whose families rejected them.¹⁰⁸

Responding to the needs of LGBT homeless youth

Over the past 40 years, the United States has become increasingly responsive to the plight of homeless youth. The primary federal response to youth homelessness has been developing and funding programs that provide direct services at the local level. While these efforts have been a lifeline to thousands of homeless youth, they are also plagued with limitations, particularly in serving LGBT youth. Lack of funding, failure to adopt strong nondiscrimination standards, and lack of targeted programming may impact the effectiveness of federally funded programs in serving LGBT homeless children and young adults.

Despite the limitations of this federal response, significant progress has been made in understanding the needs of the LGBT homeless youth population and developing programs to address those needs. Understanding and examining the strengths and weaknesses of programs that serve LGBT homeless youth helps to inform the recommendations for a full response that meets the needs of individual youth, ultimately reducing the number of youth who are out of home.

The federal legislative response to youth homelessness

Nearly 30 years ago, in 1974, Congress took action to combat youth homelessness by passing the Runaway Youth Act.¹⁰⁹ In 2003, the law was reauthorized and given a new name: the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, or RHYA.¹¹⁰ RHYA has been the primary source of federal support to local community-based organizations for services provided to homeless youth, and is administered by the Administration on Children, Youth and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services.

Organizations can receive RHYA support for three types of programs. Basic Center Programs provide housing and counseling services to homeless youth for up to three weeks.¹¹¹ Optional services that may be provided through a Basic Center Program include street-based services, home-based services for youth at

risk of being separated from their families, drug-abuse education and prevention, and screening for sexually transmitted diseases.¹¹² Street Outreach Programs support youth ages 21 and under by providing street-based education on substance use and sexual health, access to emergency shelter, treatment, counseling, and crisis intervention.¹¹³ Transitional living programs provide funding for longer-term housing programs for homeless youth through shelters, group homes, host families, or apartments.¹¹⁴ Organizations providing these services also provide services to youth to help connect them with educational opportunities, health care, employment training, and other opportunities to build skills that will help them make healthy transitions to independent living.¹¹⁵

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act also provides federal funding for housing and support services, and is often a source of financial support for organizations expanding their outreach, support, and housing-assistance programs.¹¹⁶ Title VII-B of the act, better known as the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, is intended to ensure that homeless youth have equal access to public schools, and to remove barriers to continued educational attainment and success.¹¹⁷

Unfortunately, neither the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act nor the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides dedicated funding or guidance to organizations to meet the specific needs of LGBT homeless youth. Organizations receiving grants authorized under these laws are also not held to specific non-discrimination standards that include sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. This means that some organizations may be failing to provide fair and comprehensive services to LGBT youth, and other programs that engage LGBT youth populations may not be adequately funded to provide their services.

Lawmakers have noted this shortcoming, and responded by introducing the Runaway and Homeless Youth Inclusion Act in August 2013.¹¹⁸ This law would amend the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act to prohibit federally funded programs that serve runaway and homeless youth from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Additionally, it would promote cultural-competency initiatives to ensure that programs have the knowledge and training to serve LGBT youth. Finally, it would build on existing data-collection processes to incorporate sexual orientation and gender identity demographic information, helping to reduce disparities in homelessness among the LGBT youth population.

Organizations serving homeless youth have difficulty meeting the needs of the LGBT population

Lack of focus on the plight of LGBT homeless youth at the federal level trickles down to state and local programs, and the result is a serious mismatch between the needs of youth and services focused on the LGBT population. The LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey found that 94 percent of providers have worked with LGBT homeless and runaway youth in the last year.¹¹⁹ However, very few LGBT youth received services that were tailored to their needs. Only 24 percent of programs in the same survey reported having services designed specifically for LGBT youth.¹²⁰ The primary reason cited for this mismatch between need and availability was a lack of government funding.¹²¹ While many programs that serve the general population can also benefit the lives of LGBT youth, it is worth exploring whether population-specific interventions are necessary to reduce the disparity in rates of homelessness among LGBT youth or meet unique health, family intervention, or outreach needs.

It is also important to note that LGBT homeless youth strongly desire services that are LGBT-specific. A web-based survey of more than 500 LGBT youth found that the services they most strongly desired were LGBT-specific sexual health education, LGBT peer support and guidance programs, and assistance with dating and relationship issues.¹²² Transgender youth were also more likely to prefer services that addressed stress, family issues, and safety and self-defense.¹²³ Furthermore, transgender youth expressed a strong desire to receive support from LGBT-identified adults.¹²⁴ These findings suggest that LGBT-focused programs—or programs that include LGBT leaders and staff—may be useful in attracting LGBT youth to programs and meeting population-specific needs around relationships, family, and sexual and mental health.

Some service providers also reported that they lack knowledge and experience in serving LGBT youth, which suggests that education, training, and cultural competency continue to be barriers to providing adequate and equal service to this population. Although a majority of organizations that responded to the LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey reported that they are currently working with LGBT homeless youth and runaways, not all of these organizations reported being “very knowledgeable” about the LGBT population.¹²⁵ Between 65 percent and 80 percent of organizations reported having “a great deal of experience” in working with LGBT youth.¹²⁶ This means that while many of the organizations working with LGBT youth have a wealth of experience working with the population, a portion of the organizations feel less knowledgeable or equipped to do so.

LGBT youth face barriers to accessing housing programs

For a disproportionate number of displaced LGBT youth, meeting the basic need for shelter is difficult. One survey measuring reported gaps in services found that LGBT homeless youth report higher rates than the general homeless youth population of needing assistance with both short- and long-term housing and being unable to find services.¹²⁷ Approximately one in five LGBT youth were unable to access short-term shelter, and 16 percent could not get assistance with longer-term housing—rates that are approximately double those of the non-LGBT homeless youth who were surveyed.¹²⁸

There is no conclusive reason for the disparity in housing access among LGBT homeless youth. In general, homeless youth populations indicate a number of systemic barriers to accessing housing, including long waiting lists, inadequate availability of youth housing programs, and a lack of knowledge about the services that are available.¹²⁹ Another obstacle for homeless youth in shelters and transitional living programs are the strict rules put in place by these programs.¹³⁰ While rules and boundaries are a necessary aspect of running these programs, data from education and juvenile justice institutions¹³¹ suggest that policies around bullying, drug and alcohol use, and sexual contact may result in disproportionate penalties that may impact the ability of LGBT youth to comply with standards in housing programs. Particularly given the increased risk for substance use and dependency among LGBT homeless youth, rules that require maintenance of sobriety are likely to pose significant challenges to youth who are already vulnerable—and are more likely to use again if they are living on the street.

Integrating services approaches to better serve LGBT homeless youth

The following recommendations for programs are derived from surveys cited throughout this report, and on a set of nationally recommended best practices for serving LGBT homeless youth developed by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the National Network for Youth, Lambda Legal, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights.¹³²

Reach out to homeless youth. The first step in making sure that homeless youth get the services they need is to meet them where they are, provide information about the services that are available to them, and build trust and comfort to encourage them to seek assistance.

- Street outreach should continue to be a means of meeting youth where they are, and research continues to suggest that homeless youth learn about services by word of mouth.¹³³ But these efforts may need bolstering; one survey found that street outreach was mentioned as a communication tool by 41 percent of youth, but only 10 percent of youth in shelters had actually encountered street outreach themselves.¹³⁴ Effective outreach for LGBT youth may also include specific study and targeting of areas where these youth have been known to stay while on the streets.
- Technology-based outreach tools may also be an effective means for reaching homeless youth. Fifty-eight percent of homeless youth

have access to a cell phone, and nearly 80 percent of youth expressed a desire to speak to providers on the phone if they sound as though they intend to offer assistance.¹³⁵ Ten percent of youth also expressed a preference for text-messaging outreach.¹³⁶ This indicates that mobile technology may be a strong avenue for conducting secondary outreach or follow-up contact with homeless youth.

- LGBT homeless youth express a desire for LGBT-focused programming,¹³⁷ and are often fleeing situations where they were rejected based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. It may be important for outreach materials to stress a welcoming environment for LGBT youth, highlight programs targeted at their population, and demonstrate knowledge in areas that are important to these youth.

Increase LGBT cultural competency, particularly among health services staff. As the data above illustrate, nearly all homeless youth service providers will encounter LGBT-identified youth in their programs, and it is important that these organizations have the capacity and cultural competency to treat these clients equally, with the same degree of respect as non-LGBT clients.

- Staff should be equipped to address LGBT youth and understand the terminology that relates to their identity. Understanding and being able to use identity terms such as “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” and “queer” is an important first step, as is developing a basic understanding that transgender clients should be addressed by their preferred first name and pronoun in accordance with their gender identity or expression.
- Many youth approach service providers with skepticism or fear, and LGBT youth may be particularly concerned about their ability to be open about their identities without fear of harassment or retribution. All incoming youth should be educated about the program’s nondiscrimination and harassment policies, and these policies should explicitly include protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. It should be clearly established that nondiscrimination includes freedom from homophobic and transphobic comments or anti-gay and anti-transgender slurs. This serves the dual purpose of establishing a welcoming and safe environment for LGBT clients, and creates a clear expectation of behavior for every client as soon as they enter the agency.
- To the extent possible, services that focus specifically on the needs of LGBT homeless youth should be integrated into the agencies’ ser-

vices. This proposition is supported by research on gaps in services, by self-report on the preferences of LGBT youth, and by federal experts, who state that “there is a need for service-delivery that is specific to the needs of vulnerable subpopulations ... includ[ing] [LGBT] youth.”¹³⁸

Develop relationships with other LGBT-focused community organizations. Meeting the needs of homeless youth—including those who are LGBT—is a community process and requires networks for referral and supplemental services to ensure a comprehensive package of services. Because not all organizations will have capacity to provide LGBT youth with every service related to shelter, health, family intervention, education, and job training that they may need, developing relationships with LGBT-focused and LGBT-affirming community organizations is an important element of building this service network.

- Organizations should strive to provide all youth with information about local social services that are LGBT inclusive, including health and mental health services, community groups, family supportive services, and peer-support groups.
- To maintain trust with LGBT youth and ensure that health services provided to youth are performed in a clinically and culturally competent manner, organizations that provide referrals for health services should contract with health care providers who have been trained on the health needs of LGBT youth. Provider-referral networks should also include access to medical professionals who are trained and knowledgeable about the needs of transgender youth who require medical services as part of their gender transition.

Integrate voluntary data collection into intake processes. Better data about LGBT homeless youth and their experiences are essential to understanding the experiences of this population and developing effective interventions and programming models. From intake through a youth’s involvement in an agency’s programming, structures should be put in place to collect demographic information.

- Intake forms should include questions about a youth’s sexual orientation and gender identity, but should be made optional for completion. Because youth may be reluctant to provide information about their sexual orientation or gender identity when they first enter a program, additional opportunities should be provided for youth to volunteer this information.

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or HHS, requires its youth homelessness providers to input data into its Runaway and Homeless Youth Management and Information System, or RHYMIS.¹³⁹ RHYMIS permits providers to supply data on the sexual-orientation and gender-identity demographics of clients, and providers should strive to report this data as fully as possible.
- Staff who perform client intake should not assume information about a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, youth who are asked about their relationship status should be asked if they are dating someone, rather than using terms that assume the gender of potential partners. All youth should be provided the option to indicate a preferred name and pronoun, regardless of their gender presentation.

Ensure ease of transportation. Services organizations must be made as accessible as possible for the youth they serve, and youth are often faced with challenges in accessing transportation to get them to service providers, work, and school. LGBT youth in particular may travel significant distances to access homeless service providers that they know to be welcoming environments. Meeting their need for transportation requires creative solutions and collaborative approaches. Possible models for providing transportation assistance include voucher or transportation fare subsidy programs, ride-share networks, and shuttles. Where local transportation affordability programs are available, homeless youth should be provided with application assistance.

LGBT youth require support in education and employment

LGBT homeless youth also report finding greater difficulty than the general homeless population in accessing services related to education and employment.¹⁴⁰ In one study, 29 percent of homeless youth reported they have gotten help returning to school in the last year, and 15 percent reported they needed education assistance but did not receive it.¹⁴¹ For LGBT youth, the rate of needing assistance to go back to school but not being able to get it doubled.¹⁴²

Job assistance appears to be in greater demand among homeless youth, but similar gaps in services can be found. Four out of 10 homeless youth in Hollywood reported that they received help looking for work in the last year, and 30 percent reported that they needed this kind of assistance but did not receive it.¹⁴³ The reported experiences of youth in Hollywood seems to be indicative of trends nationwide; 35 percent of respondents to the LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey offer GED education or training, and 60 percent offer vocational programs.¹⁴⁴ But very few providers—5 percent to 6 percent—offer LGBT-focused education or job-training services.¹⁴⁵

In some ways, the gaps in education and job-related programs are tied to gaps in the availability of shelter for these youth. In Hollywood, many youth in housing programs reported they had gotten the help they needed for their education, whereas youth who had slept on the street in the past 30 days were more likely to report difficulty

accessing education and work programs.¹⁴⁶ Because of the disproportionate degree to which LGBT youth are unable to access shelter, other programs may also be further out of reach. For many youth, a significant barrier to education and employment services was simply not knowing where to go for assistance, indicating a need for wider outreach and better coordination between programs that serve homeless youth.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, a significant number of youth who are unable to go back to school, receive job training, or maintain steady employment report that lack of transportation is a serious barrier.¹⁴⁸ Even well-designed and heavily promoted programs aimed at LGBT homeless youth may fail to reach their intended clients if they are geographically inaccessible, or if dependable means for attending the programs are not available.

Many health programs do not address the challenges faced by LGBT homeless youth

The Institute of Medicine has reported that the lack of high-quality and culturally competent health care services for LGBT youth mirrors the disparities in health care access that plague the health care system as a whole.¹⁴⁹ Survey information from California supports this conclusion and suggests that LGBT youth are more likely to lack access to necessary health services across the board:¹⁵⁰

- LGBT youth were twice as likely to have lacked access to medical care for a chronic illness, at 12 percent versus 6 percent.
- LGBT youth who experienced an acute illness were more than twice as likely to have been unable to receive care as the general population of homeless youth, at 10 percent versus 4 percent.
- Despite higher rates of HIV testing than other homeless youth, the LGBT population was still more likely to have needed and not received help getting an STI test—10 percent versus 3 percent—or to receive treatment for HIV, at 7 percent versus 1 percent.

Many service providers are attempting to close these gaps by offering LGBT-specific health programs. Fifty-four percent of respondents to the LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey offer health services, and 12 percent focus on LGBT youth specifically.¹⁵¹ Similarly, 63 percent offer STI and HIV testing, with slightly less than one-third offering LGBT-focused programs.¹⁵² For some areas where LGBT homeless youth are most vulnerable, however, programs did not

have as many offerings. While 65 percent of programs offered suicide-prevention programming, only 17 percent had LGBT-focused services,¹⁵³ despite astronomical rates of suicide among LGBT homeless youth. Similarly, less than half of agencies offered drug and alcohol recovery programs, coverage which may not adequately address substance-abuse-treatment needs among LGBT homeless youth.¹⁵⁴ Further exploration and research is needed to determine whether LGBT-specific interventions will assist in better meeting the health needs of these youth.

A particularly difficult area to navigate for health care providers and homeless youth is mental health services. Evidence about the experiences of homeless youth clearly indicates that mental health difficulties can be both a driver and an effect of homelessness, but the motivation and ability to access mental health services may be separate from the need to access physical health services. Youth surveyed in Hollywood reported nearly universal knowledge about how to access mental health services, but past negative experiences with those services left youth skeptical about using them because of fear of labeling, objectification, or lack of effectiveness.¹⁵⁵ For LGBT youth, this fear and reluctance may be amplified by histories with reparative therapy or other attempts to force them to “change” their sexual orientation or gender identity, or because of the medicalization of their very identities. Additionally, survey data has shown that homeless youth who slept at least one night on the streets in the previous month—a significant percentage of whom are LGBT—were more likely to have needed help finding a mental health provider and not gotten it.¹⁵⁶

Transgender homeless youth may also have specific medical needs. Some transgender adolescents and young adults may need access to hormone therapies or surgical treatment as a medically necessary aspect of their transition. While many medical professional organizations recognize that services related to gender transition constitute legitimate medical needs for many transgender people,¹⁵⁷ public insurance programs that serve homeless youth do not universally cover these services, and many providers are not culturally or clinically competent to provide the care that transgender homeless youth desperately need.

Addressing family dynamics that fuel high rates of LGBT youth homelessness

Despite the fact that family rejection and conflict are among the major drivers of homelessness among LGBT youth, there is a considerable gap in services aimed at reuniting families and building support and acceptance. More than 40 percent of

agencies responding to the LGBT Homeless Youth Provider Survey do not provide programming that addresses family conflict.¹⁵⁸ To address this problem, bills introduced in previous sessions of Congress have attempted to increase the availability of programs that focus on improving family relationships to reduce homelessness—specifically among LGBT youth¹⁵⁹—although none have passed thus far.

The Zebra Coalition: Building a comprehensive service network for LGBT youth

The Zebra Coalition is a network of central Florida social service providers, government agencies, schools, and colleges and universities that provides a full continuum of services to at-risk lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and all youth (LGBT+), ages 13 to 24. It was started in 2010 in response to the growing number of LGBT+ youth who are experiencing homelessness, bullying, physical and sexual abuse, isolation from their families, and a wide range of other challenges. The mission of the Zebra Coalition is to foster hope, dignity, and self-respect in LGBT+ youth, and to provide them with an opportunity to grow up in a safe, healthy, and supportive environment.

The primary goal of the organization is to meet the specialized needs of the LGBT+ youth by providing each young person with an individualized program that helps guide them to recovery and sustainability. A strategic plan for a continuum of care based on the individual needs of the youth is established once they have been assessed by the Zebra Coalition. Each youth signs a service commitment contract outlining the services that the Zebra Coalition will provide them. The contract specifically speaks to the personal accountability for their actions and progress.

Through the Zebra Coalition, youth are able to participate in many groups and workshops including skillZ, a life-skills class; ZebraFit!, which centers around fitness and nutrition; interACTionz, a theatre-for-social-change group; Zebra’s Cinema Safari, a cinema-therapy group; and Power Hours, a daily employment and educational support program that assists the youth with daily organizational skills and scheduling to keep them focused and on track.

The Zebra Coalition House also offers valuable services focused on LGBT+ youth. It is a drop-in center located in the Mills 50 district of Orlando, and serves as a safe and supportive environment for LGBT+ youth. Many of the services and programs offered by the coalition partners that center around peer support, discussion groups, art and music therapy, and educational and therapeutic workshops take place at the house.¹⁶⁰

Policy recommendations: Strengthening the federal response to LGBT youth homelessness

Policymakers and service providers must take action to end the crisis of homelessness among all youth, especially vulnerable LGBT youth. By combining federal support and guidance with practical improvements to services on the ground, a more comprehensive response to LGBT youth homelessness can take root, changing the lives of thousands of children and young adults across the country.

Reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act with LGBT-specific provisions

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act awards grants to public and private organizations that assist homeless youth. The bill, which is authorized every five years, is a cornerstone of the government's response to homeless youth, but there has never been an explicit mention of LGBT youth in the history of the bill's reauthorization. Fortunately, in August 2013, Reps. Gwen Moore (D-WI) and Mark Pocan (D-WI) introduced the Runaway and Homeless Youth Inclusion Act, or RHYIA, a bill that would amend the current Runaway and Homeless Youth Act to better serve the specific needs of LGBT youth.¹⁶¹

If adopted in full, RHYIA would ensure that federally funded programs that serve homeless youth are welcoming of and capable of serving LGBT youth, and that these programs collect the data necessary to improve future efforts to reduce homelessness.

Establish schools as a refuge for youth by eliminating bullying and harassment

Ensuring that schools are safe, welcoming places for LGBT youth is just as important because it addresses the widespread epidemic of bullying, but also because doing so has the potential to curtail some of the grimmest disparities associated with discrimination at such a young age such as homelessness. Many LGBT youth leave home because they feel they have nowhere else to turn; this feeling is legitimate when their schools and peers are hostile to LGBT students. Moreover, harassment and discrimination in schools exacerbate family conflicts over a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity and increase the chance of homelessness.

The Student Non-Discrimination Act, or SNDA, modeled after Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, would establish the right to an education free of harassment on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in primary and secondary schools. Moreover, if signed into law, the bill would allow students who have been bullied to seek legal recourse, and it would authorize the federal government to withhold federal funds from schools that condone the bullying of LGBT students.

Another bill—the Safe Schools Improvement Act, or SSIA—would require schools that receive federal funding to implement policies to ban bullying, including on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. It would also require states to report bullying and harassment data to the U.S. Department of Education. Sens. Robert Casey (D-PA) and Mark Kirk (R-IL) introduced the bill in the Senate and Rep. Linda Sanchez (D-CA) introduced the bill in the House earlier this year.

Whereas SNDA establishes the legal rights of victims of bullying and the federal government's response to schools condoning LGBT discrimination, SSIA requires primary and secondary schools to take a proactive role in preventing harassment and discrimination by adopting and enforcing anti-bullying policies. Importantly, SSIA also explicitly states that schools cannot allow the threat of bullying and harassment to deter students from participating in school programs and extracurricular activities. In-school and afterschool programs have the potential to prevent homelessness for LGBT youth by providing a positive environment and deterring youth from turning to substance abuse and other risky behaviors to cope with peer rejection. Discouraging youth from engaging in these behaviors alone reduces their risk of homelessness at some point in their lives.¹⁶²

Research also shows that abstaining from risky behaviors and performing well in school can reduce family conflict at home—one of the primary reasons why LGBT youth experience homelessness.¹⁶³ By adopting and enforcing anti-bullying policies, schools can help alleviate behaviors associated with family conflict and rejection such as substance abuse and poor academic performance, decreasing the odds of a child becoming homeless.

Funding

It is crucial that programs serving homeless youth are adequately funded to ensure continued provision of services and expand the ability of community organizations to meet homeless youths' needs. The clear gaps in shelter, health, and other programs show that current funding sources for providers are insufficient. To address this shortfall, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act must be reauthorized, and funding for RHYA programs must be increased to match baseline operational costs and support growth and expansion of services. Currently, RHYA programs are funded at \$115 million per year—an amount that has remained unchanged for the past three fiscal years.¹⁶⁴

A failure to increase funding to match the basic increase in costs for RHYA programs materially impacts the services provided to homeless youth, including those who are LGBT. Furthermore, failure to adequately fund services for homeless youth is fiscally irresponsible, since the services provided through RHYA grants are cost-effective alternatives to other institutions where homeless youth may be housed, as shown in the accompanying text box.

Funding services provided to homeless youth is sound fiscal policy

Juvenile justice programs: When homeless youth are unable to access shelter, job assistance, and other assistance, they often end up being pushed into juvenile justice systems. In addition to the negative impact on these youths' lives, this can actually increase the government costs:

- Conservative estimates of annual costs for juvenile justice systems are between \$25,000 and \$55,000 per youth.¹⁶⁵
- In FY 2008, the average annual cost of serving youth in a transitional living program was \$14,726.¹⁶⁶
- By shifting a mere 500 youth from juvenile justice residential facilities to transitional living programs, the conservative cost savings would be \$5,137,000,¹⁶⁷ but the potential cost savings could be as high as \$20,137,000.¹⁶⁸

In addition, evidence suggests that RHYA programs improve outcomes in education and employment, which can assist in stimulating the economy. Employment rates of youth in basic centers increased by 24 percent, and 60 percent of youth in transitional living programs were employed part time or full time, compared to 41 percent of homeless youth not participating in a TLP.¹⁶⁹

Foster care programs: Rather than being placed with a foster family through child-welfare programs, some youth may benefit from participating in RHYA-funded transitional living programs, which can provide homeless young adults with services that will help them live independently. In addition, this shift in programming may save state funds:

- The average annual amount of federal foster care funds received by the states ranges from \$4,155 to \$33,091 per eligible child based on three-year average claims from FY 2001 to FY 2003.¹⁷⁰
- In FY 2008, the average annual cost of serving youth in a RHYA transitional living program was \$14,726.¹⁷¹
- The savings from using transitional living programs instead of foster care could be as high as \$19,175 per child.

For FY 2014, the Administration for Children and Families has proposed a reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act that includes demonstration funding to test interventions focused on LGBT youth in alignment with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness Framework for Ending Youth Homelessness.¹⁷² The allocation of these funds is crucial to understanding programs that effectively serve LGBT homeless youth and the drivers of LGBT youth homelessness.

Strengthen home-based interventions to build strong and supportive families

In addition to battling bullying in schools and improving existing programs for homeless youth, Congress should seek new solutions to end LGBT youth homelessness. The bulk of the Reconnecting Youth to Prevent Homelessness Act aims to improve training, educational opportunities, and permanency planning for older foster-care youth and reduce homelessness of all young people, LGBT or otherwise. But one particular part of the bill calls on the secretary of health and human services to establish a demonstration project to develop programs that improve family relationships and reduce homelessness specifically for LGBT youth. As referenced earlier, a growing body of research suggests that this family centered approach is one of the best ways to support LGBT homeless youth and prevent the conflict that pushes youth out of their homes, so targeted support for these programs has the potential to significantly decrease rates of homelessness overall.

The Reconnecting Youth to Prevent Homelessness Act was introduced in an earlier session of Congress by then-Sen. John Kerry (D-MA) but has not been reintroduced into the 113th Congress.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Inclusion Act would also call for the establishment of a demonstration project to improve family relationships and reduce homelessness specifically for LGBT youth.

Juvenile justice reform

Rejection from parents and teachers often sets off a tragic chain of events for LGBT youth, frequently leading to involvement in the juvenile justice system and

possible homelessness. Passing the Runaway and Homeless Youth Inclusion Act and the Reconnecting Youth to Prevent Homelessness Act would be an investment in family-centered interventions, and passing the Safe Schools Improvement Act and the Student Non-Discrimination Act would ensure that LGBT youth do not end up in the juvenile justice system for protecting themselves from the discrimination they face on a daily basis at school.

LGBT youth also need to be protected from discriminatory treatment in the juvenile justice systems. Passage of federal protections prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity and expression in all areas of the juvenile justice and detention systems is crucial. Additionally, amendment of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act, or SORNA, to clarify that youth convicted of certain sex-based offenses should be exempted from mandatory sex-offender registration would help alleviate the long-lasting negative impact for LGBT youth who are convicted of engaging in consensual same-sex sexual activity.

Finally, more robust data are needed to quantify and address the criminalization of LGBT youth. In particular, the Department of Education's school discipline data-collection systems should include collection of both sexual orientation and gender identity data that captures information on the experiences of bullying among LGBT youth and on the rates of disciplinary action taken against these students.

Conclusion

No child should face rejection from their families or discrimination at school because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. No youth should ever be denied critical public services or unjustly incarcerated because of prejudice and stigma. Identifying as LGBT should not be the first step in a dangerous downward spiral that ends in homelessness or worse for today's youth.

If the well-being of a nation's youth is a measure of its moral and social health, the rates of homelessness among LGBT youth show a sickness in America. The epidemic exposes the fissures in American society when it comes to education, health, civil rights, and employment for LGBT and non-LGBT youth alike, painting a grim picture of the country's response to children who fall through the cracks. Service providers and policymakers must work together to end the epidemic of homelessness, and repair systems that are failing vulnerable youth. Federal support and guidance, along with targeted and culturally competent programming can bridge the service gaps that harm LGBT youth, and pave the way toward an American society in which all youth have a safe place to call home.

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Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a grant from the Palette Fund.

The authors would like to thank Anthony Armstrong of the Zebra Coalition and Nathan Manske of I’m From Driftwood for their contributions to this report, as well as Tony, Sassafras Lowrey, and other contributors who shared their stories with us. Thanks and appreciation also go to David Hudson, Jason Mogavero, and the hardworking Editorial team for their guidance and feedback in writing this report. We would also like to thank the Palette Fund for their generous assistance in supporting the efforts of the Center for American Progress to address LGBT youth homelessness.

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