

Explainer



Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research

A National Approach to Meeting the Needs of LGBTQ Homeless Youth

April 2009

Prevalence and Experiences of LGBTQ Homeless Youth

Various incidence studies of homeless youth in the United States estimate that over 2 million youth experience one night of homelessness each year, with over 100,000 sleeping long-term on the streets. Multiple research studies indicate that a conservative estimate finds 1 in 5 homeless youth self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning LGBTQ, twice as prevalent as for LGBTQ youth in the general population. LGBTQ youth experience an alarmingly high rate of homelessness when compared to heterosexual youth. Even more troubling is the fact that homeless LGBTQ youth experience higher rates of physical assaults, sexual exploitation, and mental health deterioration than their heterosexual homeless peers.

Unaccompanied homeless youth are defined as youth ages 12 to 24 with no familial support or permanent residency. Homeless LGBTQ youth typically sleep in shelters, public spaces, abandoned buildings, cars, or outside, or remain doubled-up with friends in temporary, highly unstable housing arrangements. Some will be solicited and exploited by adults and exchange sex for a place to stay.

Causal Factors

Research confirms that one cause of homelessness for LGBTQ youth is rejection and forcible eviction from their homes due to parental condemnation of their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, study of LGBTQ homeless youth also confirms that, for most, homelessness is the result of multiple and overlapping factors, including: severe family conflict, abuse, neglect, abandonment, poverty, and mental health or physical disabilities. Displacement and homelessness occur during critical youth development stages, which may result in

subsequent challenges to healthy and productive adult years.

Risks to LGBTQ Youth While Homeless

Once homeless, LGBTQ youth are at higher risk for victimization and experience higher incidents of mental health problems. A study of lesbian and gay homeless 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 more likely to meet criteria for major depressive episodes. LGB homeless youth are also more likely to attempt suicide (62 percent) than their heterosexual homeless peers (29 percent). Another risk is exposure to sexual abuse and exploitation. LGBTQ homeless youth experience an average of 7.4 more acts of sexual violence toward them than their heterosexual peers. Finally, LGBTQ homeless youth may be at greater risk for drug abuse. One study has noted that amphetamine and injection drug use is more prevalent with LGBTQ youth than their straight peers.

For more information, download *Incidence and Vulnerability of LGBTQ Homeless Youth* at: www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/2141.

Reform Agenda to End Homelessness for LGBTQ Youth

Ending homelessness for LGBTQ youth will require collaborative efforts to:

1. Broaden community awareness of the prevalence and causes of homelessness for LGBTQ youth;
2. Engage LGBTQ adults and allies in building local advocacy networks to expand services, shelter, and housing for LGBTQ homeless youth;
3. Secure increased public investment from local, state, and federal government in services, shelter, and housing for homeless LGBTQ youth; and

4. Improve the cultural competency of local services, shelter, and housing to meet the needs of LGBTQ homeless youth.

Currently, Congress offers \$115 million to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs. These funds support street outreach programs which made over 740,000 contacts in 2008, but federal funding to transitional living programs only provided housing to less than 4,000 homeless youth. The lack of housing resources for homeless youth is appalling.

The support and collaboration of the federal government is critical for reform to end homelessness for LGBTQ youth. Federal advocacy should be focused on three approaches:

- seeking increased federal appropriations to expand youth housing, shelter, and services;
- ensuring federally funded homeless youth services are inclusive and responsive to the needs of LGBTQ homeless youth; and
- seeking cooperation with HUD to expand housing opportunities through the establishment of youth housing models which couple rental assistance with positive youth development services.

Recommendations for Best Practices in Serving LGBTQ Homeless Youth:

The following recommendations were developed by members of the National Advisory Council on LGBTQ Homeless Youth with the purpose of providing a resource for community-based organizations or agencies serving LGBTQ homeless youth. The goal of the recommendations is to ensure that agencies are prepared to offer appropriate support to ensure that the youth are safe and have access to the necessary resources.

1. Recommendations to youth-serving professionals, case workers, and advocates:

In order to best serve LGBTQ homeless youth, youth-serving professionals who have direct contact with LGBTQ youth must ensure their safety and bolster their positive development. Professionals must be able to use common vocabulary and know what to do when a youth self-discloses his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. Intake procedures and initial contact offer opportunities to show competency and familiarity with LGBT issues. Youth-serving professionals must acknowledge that transgendered youth and LGB youth have unique needs from each other and from heterosexual

homeless youth. Staff should advocate for nondiscrimination and harassment policies within their own organizations and should intervene when aware of possible harassment or mistreatment. LGBTQ homeless youth and their families should be encouraged to access educational, medical, mental health care, and social services that are affirming and inclusive.

2. Recommendations to Administrators and Supervisors:

Administrators and supervisors hold an important responsibility for leading in the efforts to maintain a healthy and supportive environment for LGBTQ homeless youth. In order to best achieve this, organizations should collect and evaluate data to better understand LGBT youth, establish an environment where LGBT youth feel welcome by using LGBT supportive images and language on materials that enforce program practices, and adopt nondiscrimination, grievance, and confidentiality policies. Leadership should emulate inclusive and affirming behavior and implement sound recruitment and hiring practices that emphasize core skills. Also, administrators and directors can facilitate relationship building with LGBT organizations and services relevant to supporting LGBTQ youth.

3. Recommendations for Improving Residential Services:

Residential facilities and centers offer emergency and long-term housing options for abused and neglected LGBTQ homeless youth. Agencies offering residential services must ensure that programs are free from violence and harassment. Placing LGBTQ youth in a room with a demeaning or hostile individual should be avoided, and protecting them from emotional isolation should be a priority. There should be equal treatment and integration in shelter placement determination and in use of bathrooms in accordance with an individualized assessment accounting for safety and gender identity. To improve residential services, individually assess each participant and maintain close contact with LGBT youth. It is vital to place each LGBTQ youth in sleeping arrangements based on their identity and provide them with information on their options.

For more information or wish to join our efforts, please contact: **The National Alliance to End Homelessness, National Advisory Council on LGBTQ Homeless Youth** - Rich Hooks Wayman (rhookswayman@naeh.org) or LaKesha Pope (lpope@naeh.org); (202) 638-1526; www.endhomelessness.org