

A young person with dark hair, wearing a dark hooded sweatshirt and jeans, is sitting on the ground against a light-colored brick wall. They are looking off to the side with a somber expression. The background is a large, light-colored brick wall. A large, dark, stylized arrow graphic points from the top left towards the center of the page.

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL
AND TRANSGENDER YOUTH

An Epidemic of Homelessness

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute
National Coalition for the Homeless



**LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL
AND TRANSGENDER YOUTH**

An Epidemic of Homelessness

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National Gay and Lesbian Task Force



The **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute** is a think tank dedicated to research, policy analysis and strategy development to advance greater understanding and equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

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Executive summary

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that the number of homeless and runaway youth ranges from 575,000 to 1.6 million per year.¹ Our analysis of the available research suggests that between 20 percent and 40 percent of all homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT).²

Given that between 3 percent and 5 percent of the U.S. population identifies as lesbian, gay or bisexual, it is clear that LGBT youth experience homelessness at a disproportionate rate. It is this reality that prompted the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (the Task Force), in collaboration with the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), to produce this publication.

Through a comprehensive review of the available academic research and professional literature, we answer some basic questions, including why so many LGBT youth are becoming and remaining homeless. We report on the harassment and violence that many of these youth experience in the shelter system and we summarize research on critical problems affecting them, including mental health issues, substance abuse and risky sexual behavior. We also analyze the federal government's response to youth homelessness, including the specific impact on LGBT homeless youth of increased federal funding for faith-based service providers.

We also partnered with five social service agencies who have written sections that detail model programs they have developed to improve service delivery to LGBT homeless youth. In order to put a face to all of this research and data, we also include profiles of LGBT homeless youth, many of which were collected through focus groups we conducted at service providers around the country. Finally, in consultation with a number of youth advocacy organizations, we conclude with a series of state-, federal- and practitioner-level policy recommendations that can help to curb this epidemic.

Our analysis of the available research suggests that between 20 percent and 40 percent of all homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT).

1 Robertson, M. J. & Toro, P. A. (1998). *Homeless youth: Research, intervention, and policy*. United States Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved June 3, 2005, from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/progsys/homeless/symposium/3-Youth.htm>

2 See pages 11-14 of the full report and the addendum beginning on p.162 for a more detailed summary of the available research on the proportion of homeless youth who identify as LGBT. Regarding the proportion of the U.S. population that identifies as LGB, the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey found that 4.9 percent of men and 4.1 percent of women ages 18-44 report ever having a same-sex partner. The 2002 National Survey of Family Growth found that 4.1 percent of 18-44 year-olds identify as LGB. Analysis of 2006 National Exit poll (NEP) data found that 3 percent of voters identify as lesbian or gay (the NEP did not allow respondents to identify as bisexual or transgender). NEP and Voter New Service (VNS) polls since 1996 have found the number of lesbian and gay respondents to range from 3 percent to 5 percent. The available research on the proportion of the U.S. population that identifies as transgender is too limited to permit an accurate estimation..



WHY ARE SO MANY LGBT YOUTH BECOMING HOMELESS?

Family conflict is the primary cause of homelessness for all youth, LGBT or straight. Specifically, familial conflict over a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity is a significant factor that leads to homelessness or the need for out-of-home care.³ According to one study, 50 percent of gay teens experienced a negative reaction from their parents when they came out and 26 percent were kicked out of their homes.⁴ Another study found that more than one-third of youth who are homeless or in the care of social services experienced a violent physical assault when they came out,⁵ which can lead to youth leaving a shelter or foster home because they actually feel safer on the streets.

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WHAT IMPACT DOES HOMELESSNESS HAVE ON LGBT YOUTH SPECIFICALLY?

Whether LGBT youth are homeless on the streets or in temporary shelter, our review of the available research reveals that they face a multitude of ongoing crises that threaten their chances of becoming healthy, independent adults.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

LGBT homeless youth are especially vulnerable to depression, loneliness and psychosomatic illness,⁶ withdrawn behavior, social problems and delinquency.⁷ According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the fact that LGBT youth live in “a society that discriminates against and stigmatizes homosexuals” makes them more vulnerable to mental health issues than heterosexual youth.⁸ This vulnerability is only magnified for LGBT youth who are homeless.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The combination of stressors inherent to the daily life of homeless youth leads them to abuse drugs and alcohol. For example, in Minnesota, five separate statewide studies found that between 10 and 20 percent of homeless youth self-identify as chemically dependent.⁹ These risks are exacerbated for homeless youth identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB).¹⁰

3 Clatts, M. J., Davis, W. J., Sothoran, J. L. & Atillasoy, A. (1998). Correlates and distribution of HIV risk behaviors among homeless youth in New York City. *Child Welfare, 77*(2). See also Hyde, J. (2005). From home to street: Understanding young people's transitions into homelessness. *Journal of Adolescence, 28*. p.175.

4 Remafedi, G. (1987). Male homosexuality: The adolescent perspective. *Pediatrics, 79*).

5 Thompson, S. J., Safyer, A. W. & Pollio, D. E. (2001). Differences and predictors of family reunification among subgroups of runaway youths using shelter services. *Social Work Research, 25*(3).

6 McWhirter, B. T. (1990). Loneliness: A review of current literature with implications for counseling and research. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 68*.

7 Cochran, B. N., Stewart, A. J., Ginzler, J. A. & Cauce, A. M. (2002). Challenges faced by homeless sexual minorities: Comparison of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender homeless adolescents with their heterosexual counterparts. *American Journal of Public Health, 92*(5). pp.774-775.

8 Gibson, P. (1989). Gay male and lesbian youth suicide, vol. 3: Preventions and interventions in youth suicide. In *Report of the secretary's task force on youth suicide*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

9 Wilder Research. (2005). *Homeless youth in Minnesota: 2003 statewide survey of people without permanent shelter*. Author. Retrieved June 26, 2006, from <http://www.wilder.org/download.0.html?report=410>. p.27.

10 Van Leeuwen, J. M., Boyle, S., Salmons-Sautel, S., Baker, D. N., Garcia, J., Hoffman, A., & Hopfer, C. J. (2006). *Lesbian, gay and bisexual homeless youth: An eight city public health perspective*. Unpublished work.

Personal drug usage, family drug usage, and the likelihood of enrolling in a treatment program are all higher for LGB homeless youth than for their heterosexual peers.¹¹

RISKY SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

All homeless youth are especially vulnerable to engaging in risky sexual behaviors because their basic needs for food and shelter are not being met.¹² Defined as “exchanging sex for anything needed, including money, food, clothes, a place to stay or drugs,”¹³ survival sex is the last resort for many LGBT homeless youth. A study of homeless youth in Canada found that those who identify as LGBT were three times more likely to participate in survival sex than their heterosexual peers,¹⁴ and 50 percent of homeless youth in another study considered it likely or very likely that they will someday test positive for HIV.¹⁵

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VICTIMIZATION OF HOMELESS LGBT YOUTH

LGBT youth face the threat of victimization everywhere: at home, at school, at their jobs, and, for those who are out-of-home, at shelters and on the streets. According to the National Runaway Switchboard, LGBT homeless youth are seven times more likely than their heterosexual peers to be victims of a crime.¹⁶ While some public safety agencies try to help this vulnerable population,¹⁷ others adopt a “blame the victim” approach, further decreasing the odds of victimized youth feeling safe reporting their experiences.¹⁸

LGBT HOMELESS YOUTH AND THE JUVENILE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

While there is a paucity of academic research about the experiences of LGBT youth who end up in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, preliminary evidence suggests that they are disproportionately the victims of harassment and violence, including rape. For example, respondents in one small study reported that lesbians and bisexual girls are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system and that they are forced to live among a population of inmates who are violently homophobic.¹⁹ Gay male youth in the system are also emotionally, physically and sexually assaulted by staff and inmates. One respondent in a study of the legal rights of young people in state custody reported that staff members think that “[if] a youth is gay, they want to have sex with all the other boys, so they did not protect me from unwanted sexual advances.”²⁰

11 Ibid., p.18.

12 Rosenthal, D. & Moore, S. (1994). Homeless youths: Sexual and drug-related behavior, sexual beliefs and HIV/AIDS risk. *AIDS Care*, 6(1).

13 Cited in Anderson, J. E., Freese, T. E. & Pennbridge, J. N. (1994). Sexual risk and condom use among street youth in Hollywood. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 26(1), p.23.

14 Gaetz, S. (2004). Safe streets for whom? Homeless youth, social exclusion, and criminal victimization. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 46(6).

15 Kihara, D. (1999). Giuliani's suppressed report on homeless youth. *The Village Voice*, 44(33).

16 National Runaway Switchboard. (2005). *Being out and safe: Helping GLBTQ youth in crisis*. Author.

17 Dylan, N. (2004). City enters partnership to assist lesbian and gay homeless youth. *Nation's Cities Weekly*, 27(10).

18 Bounds, A. (2002, September 24). Intolerance discussed BHS school offers weeklong focus on tolerance. *Boulder Daily Camera*. p.C3. See also: D'Augelli, A. R. & Hershberger, S. L. (1993). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in community settings: Personal challenges and mental health problems. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 21(4). See also: Arnott, J. (1994). Gays and lesbians in the criminal justice system. In *Multicultural Perspectives in Criminal Justice and Criminology*. Springfield, OH: C. Thomas Charles.

19 Curtin, M. (2002). Lesbian and bisexual girls in the juvenile justice system. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 19(4).

20 Estrada, R. & Marksamer, J. (2006). The legal rights of young people in state custody: What child welfare and juvenile justice professionals need to know when working with LGBT youth. *Child Welfare*, 85(2).



TRANSGENDER HOMELESS YOUTH

Transgender youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless population. More generally, some reports indicate that one in five transgender individuals need or are at risk of needing homeless shelter assistance.²¹ However, most shelters are segregated by birth sex, regardless of the individual's gender identity,²² and homeless transgender youth are even ostracized by some agencies that serve their LGB peers.²³

THE FEDERAL RESPONSE TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Since 1974, when the federal government enacted the original Runaway Youth Act, there have been numerous pieces of legislation addressing youth homelessness. Most recently, the Runaway, Homeless and Missing Children Protection Act (RHMCPA) was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2003 and is up for reauthorization in 2008.²⁴

Among the most important provisions of this complex piece of legislation are programs that allocate funding for core homeless youth services, including basic drop-in centers, street outreach efforts, transitional living programs (TLPs) and the National Runaway Switchboard. While the law does not allocate funding for LGBT-specific services, some funds have been awarded to agencies who work exclusively with LGBT youth, as well as those who seek to serve LGBT homeless youth as part of a broader mission.

Unfortunately, homeless youth programs have been grossly under funded, contributing to a shortfall of available spaces for youth who need support. In 2004 alone, due to this lack of funding, more than 2,500 youth were denied access to a TLP program for which they were otherwise qualified.²⁵ Additionally, 4,200 youth were turned away from Basic Center Programs, which provide family reunification services and emergency shelter.²⁶

THE POTENTIAL FOR ANTI-LGBT DISCRIMINATION AT FAITH-BASED SERVICE PROVIDERS

Lack of funding is not the only obstacle preventing LGBT homeless youth from receiving the services they need. In 2002, President George W. Bush issued an executive order permitting federal funding for faith-based organizations (FBOs) to provide social services.²⁷ While more and more FBOs are receiving federal funds, overall funding levels for homeless youth services have not increased. Consequently, there is a possibility that the impact of FBOs will not be to increase services to the homeless, but rather only to change *who* provides those services.

A number of faith-based providers oppose legal and social equality for LGBT people, which

21 Cited in Mottet, L. & Ohle, J. M. (2003). *Transitioning our shelters: A guide to making homeless shelters safe for transgender people*. Retrieved June 12, 2006, from <http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/TransHomeless.pdf>

22 Ibid.

23 HCH Clinicians' Network (2002, June). Crossing to safety: Transgender health & homelessness. *Healing Hands*, 6, pp. 1-6.

24 Public Law 108-96 for fiscal years 2004 through 2008.

25 Data compiled from the federally administered Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System (RHYMIS).

26 Project HOPE: Virginia education for homeless children and youth program. (2006). *Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs: Strengthening youth and families in every community*. Author. Retrieved September 10, 2006, from <http://www.wm.edu/hope/Seminar/RHYA.pdf>

27 White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. (2006). President Bush's faith-based and community initiative. Author. Retrieved August 31, 2006, from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/mission.html>

raises serious questions about whether LGBT homeless youth can access services in a safe and nurturing environment. If an organization's core belief is that homosexuality is wrong, that organization (and its committed leaders and volunteers) may not respect a client's sexual orientation or gender identity and may expose LGBT youth to discriminatory treatment.

For example, an internal Salvation Army document obtained by the *Washington Post* in 2001 confirmed that "...the White House had made a 'firm commitment' to issue a regulation protecting religious charities from state and city efforts to prevent discrimination against gays in hiring and providing benefits."²⁸ Public policy that exempts religious organizations providing social services from non-discrimination laws in hiring sets a dangerous precedent. If an otherwise qualified employee can be fired simply because of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, what guarantee is there that clients, including LGBT homeless youth, will be supported and treated fairly? More research is needed on the policies of FBOs that provide services for LGBT homeless youth.

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THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBT HOMELESS YOUTH IN THE SHELTER SYSTEM

The majority of existing shelters and other care systems are not providing safe and effective services to LGBT homeless youth.²⁹ For example, in New York City, more than 60 percent of beds for homeless youth are provided by Covenant House, a facility where LGBT youth report that they have been threatened, belittled and abused by staff and other youth because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.³⁰

At one residential placement facility in Michigan, LGBT teens, or those suspected of being LGBT, were forced to wear orange jumpsuits to alert staff and other residents. At another transitional housing placement, staff removed the bedroom door of an out gay youth, supposedly to ward off any homosexual behavior. The second bed in the room was left empty and other residents were warned that if they misbehaved they would have to share the room with the "gay kid."³¹

LGBT homeless youth at the Home for Little Wanderers in Massachusetts have reported being kicked out of other agencies when they revealed their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many also said that the risks inherent to living in a space that was not protecting them made them think that they were better off having unsafe sex and contracting HIV because they would then be eligible for specific housing funds reserved for HIV-positive homeless people in need.³²

28 Allen, M. & Milbank, D. (2001, July 12). Rove heard charity plea on gay bias. *Washington Post*. Retrieved September 25, 2006, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A48279-2001Jul11?language=printer>.

29 Mallon, G. P. (1997). The delivery of child welfare services to gay and lesbian adolescents. In Central Toronto Youth Services, *Pride and Prejudice: Working with lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth*. Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services.

30 Email communication between the author and the Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services. New York, NY. See also: Murphy, J. (2005). *Wounded pride: LGBT kids say city-funded shelter for the homeless breaks its covenant*. Village Voice. Retrieved September 10, 2006, from <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0517.murphy1.63374.5.html>

31 Both examples were confirmed in personal conversations between the author and social service agency staff who had worked at the offending agencies, or had worked with youth who had resided at those agencies.

32 As confirmed by Colby Berger, LGBT training manager at Waltham House.



MODEL PROGRAMS TO IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY TO LGBT HOMELESS YOUTH

Despite the potential for mistreatment of LGBT homeless youth by some agencies, there are others who set an example for their peers. Our five contributing homeless youth service providers represent the diverse range of agencies working with homeless LGBT youth, though they are by no means the only agencies doing great work. We hope that sharing their expertise will in turn help other agencies to improve the service and support they provide to this community.

1. Theresa Nolan of Green Chimneys in New York City discusses the role of transitional living programs in the continuum of care that LGBT youth experiencing homelessness might pass through.
2. Colby Berger of Waltham House in Massachusetts provides a case study of how her agency worked in collaboration with the state department of social services to train thousands of professional staff who work with homeless youth about LGBT issues.
3. Grace McClelland from the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit, an organization that works primarily with homeless LGBT youth of color, provides a description of the Center's street outreach and drop-in center programming.
4. Mary Jo Callan and Mia White from Ozone House in Ann Arbor, Michigan discuss how their staff created a LGBT-safe space at an agency that works predominantly with heterosexual youth.
5. Susan Boyle of Urban Peak in Denver, Colorado describes policies and procedures that make shelters safe and welcoming for transgender homeless youth.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This report concludes with a series of policy recommendations that can help to curb the epidemic of LGBT youth homelessness. While our focus in this publication and in these policy recommendations is to address LGBT-specific concerns, we believe that homelessness is not an issue that can be tackled piecemeal. Wholesale improvement is needed, and that is what we propose. Our recommendations are not intended to be an exhaustive list of every policy change that would make the experience of homeless youth better. Rather, we highlight some of the crucial problem areas where policy change is both needed and reasonably possible.

Homelessness is not an issue that can be tackled piecemeal. Wholesale improvement is needed, and that is what we propose.

FEDERAL LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Reauthorize and increase appropriations for federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) programs.
2. Permit youth who are minors, especially unaccompanied minors, to receive primary and specialty health care services without the consent of a parent or guardian.
3. Develop a national estimate of the incidence and prevalence of homelessness among

American youth, gathering data that aids in the provision of appropriate services.

4. Authorize and appropriate federal funds for developmental, preventive and intervention programs targeted to LGBT youth.
5. Raise federal and state minimum wages to an appropriate level.
6. Broaden the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of "homeless individual" to include living arrangements common to homeless youth.

STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish funding streams to provide housing options for all homeless youth. Require that recipients of these funds are committed to the safe and appropriate treatment of LGBT homeless youth, with penalties for non-compliance including the loss of government funding. These funds would supplement federal appropriations.
2. Permit dedicated shelter space and housing for LGBT youth.
3. Repeal existing laws and policies that prevent single and partnered LGBT individuals from serving as adoptive and foster parents.
4. Discourage the criminalization of homelessness and the activities inherent to the daily lives of people experiencing homelessness.
5. Expand the availability of comprehensive health insurance and services to all low-income youth through the age of 24 via Medicaid.

PRACTITIONER LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Require all agencies that seek government funding and licensure to serve homeless youth to demonstrate awareness and cultural competency of LGBT issues and populations at the institutional level and to adopt nondiscrimination policies for LGBT youth.
2. Mandate individual-level LGBT awareness training and demonstrated cultural competency as a part of the professional licensing process of all health and social service professions.
3. Mandate LGBT awareness training for all state agency staff who work in child welfare or juvenile justice divisions.

CONCLUSION

Once implemented, these policy recommendations will help not only LGBT homeless youth, but all youth abandoned by their family or forced to leave home. In this report, we extensively review the academic and professional literature on the myriad challenges faced by LGBT homeless youth. The research shows that despite these challenges, many of these youth are remarkably resilient and have benefited from support from agencies like those in our model programs chapters who have worked to ensure that youth feel safe, welcome and supported. Regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, every young person deserves a safe and nurturing environment in which to grow and learn. It is our hope that this report will bring renewed attention to an issue that has been inadequately addressed for far too long.