

LGBTQ Homelessness

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Background

The acronym LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (or Queer). Members of the LGBTQ community often face discrimination in many areas of their lives, but especially regarding housing status. LGBTQ individuals, especially youth, are highly overrepresented in the homeless population. They face difficulty in trying to find support services, especially since they may be harassed in shelters by peers or staff and therefore feel uncomfortable and unsafe seeking help. In addition, some transgender individuals have even been turned away from shelters solely due to their gender identity, or have been subjected to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse when forced to stay with members of the sex they were assigned at birth (especially in the case of transgender women).

Youth Issues

Throughout the past few decades, youth have begun to come out as LGBTQ to their families at younger and younger ages, which has put them in the precarious position of potentially being rejected by their families while they are still minors and reliant upon parents for shelter and support. If they are rejected by their families, they are often left with nowhere else to go and end up in the street, which can be profoundly dangerous.

- Up to 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ, while the general youth population is only 10% LGBTQ
- In Washington D.C. alone, 43% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ
- 26% of homeless LGBTQ youth report being forced out of their homes solely because of their sexual orientation or gender identity
- According to a survey of homeless service providers administered by the Williams Institute at UCLA, 68% of the homeless youth they served had a history of family rejection, 65% had a history of mental health issues (such as depression or anxiety), and 54% had a history of family abuse (physical, emotional, or sexual)
- Many LGBTQ youth have been abused at homeless shelters, especially those meant for adults, while many others avoid shelters altogether
- Discharge and emancipation from foster care is a large contributor to youth homelessness. Studies show that 12% to 36% of emancipated foster care youth will report being homeless at least once after discharge from care.
- Homeless LGBTQ youth are more likely than their straight counterparts to engage in survival sex (the exchange of sexual favors for basic needs, like food, clothing, and shelter), with a Canadian study finding that transgender youth are 3 times more likely to engage in survival sex than cisgendered youth. The National LGBTQ task force found that the main reason for engaging in survival sex was simply to have a bed to sleep in each night
- LGBTQ youth, once they are homeless, are at higher risk for victimization, mental health problems, and unsafe sexual practices. 58.7% of LGBTQ homeless youth have been sexually victimized compared to 33.4% of heterosexual homeless youth
- LGBTQ youth are roughly 7.4 more likely to experience acts of sexual violence than heterosexual homeless youth
- LGBTQ homeless youth attempt suicide at much higher rates (62%) than heterosexual homeless youth (29%)

Transgender Policies

People who are transgender face additional struggles while experiencing homelessness. They are often discriminated against on the basis of their gender identity, or forced to stay in shelters with members of their biological sex rather than their gender identity. Some service providers even have signs posted outside which bar transgender people from entering or requesting services.

- 19% of people who are transgender or gender-nonconforming have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives
- Transgender youth tend to spend a longer period of time being homeless than their straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual peers. Data from New York City shows that the average period away from family for youth is 26 months, and the average period is slightly higher for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth at 29 months. However, for transgender youth, it jumps dramatically to an average period of separation from family of 52 months, with a median separation period of 30 months
- Of those transgender adults who tried to access a shelter, 55% were harassed by shelter staff or residents, 22% were sexually assaulted by shelter staff or residents, and 29% were turned away from a shelter altogether.
- On September 20th, 2016, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), released a new Gender Identity Rule which ensures equal access to HUD shelter programs for transgender and gender expansive people. However, this will not affect all shelters and service providers, since not all of them receive federal funding

Policy Issues

- The highest legislative priority should be to reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act and include LGBTQ specific provisions
- Since the main cause of LGBTQ youth homelessness is family rejection, efforts and campaigns can be undertaken to either prevent youth from being thrown out of the home if they are at risk of homelessness, or to reunify families and open the minds of parents whose children are already homeless
- We should encourage federal, state, and local agencies to ensure that LGBTQ youth are placed in supportive foster homes
- At homeless shelters, we can place transgender youth and adults in safe and appropriate shelter and housing programs based upon both their gender identity and an individualized assessment
- Schools should be a safe haven for all youth, including LGBTQ youth. We need to address the role of unsafe schools have in promoting youth homelessness, and aggressively address school bullying. We also should better ensure that homeless youth are able to continue their education
- Shelter staff need to be trained on how to be an ally to LGBT individuals and written policies must be put in place to keep discrimination from occurring
- Dedicated shelters for LGBTQ people and youth provide an opportunity for a safe space to provide dedicated services for those who need it most. It is also beneficial for LGBTQ individuals who are experiencing homelessness to see LGBTQ staff working at shelters, since they can provide unique understanding and inspiration.

Resources

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