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On the Streets

The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth

Nico Sifra Quintana, Josh Rosenthal, and Jeff Krehely June 2010

Fast facts

The dire consequences of stigma and discrimination for gay* and transgender homeless youth

Homelessness disrupts a young person's normal development, often leading to issues in mental and physical health, educational attainment, and behavior. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth who are homeless must face these challenges on top of social stigma, discrimination, and frequently rejection by their families.¹ The failure of critical family and social safety nets to support these youth has catastrophic consequences on their economic stability, educational attainment, physical and mental health, economic future, and life expectancy.

Family rejection causing more suicide attempts among gay and transgender youth

Family rejection of gay and transgender youth often leads to attempted suicide. According to a 2009 study, gay youth who reported higher levels of family rejection in adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to have attempted suicide than their gay peers who did not experience family rejection. They were also 5.9 times as likely to have experienced depression, 3.4 times as likely to have used illicit drugs, and 3.4 times as likely to have had unprotected sex.²

Suicide becomes more of a danger when a gay and/or transgender youth becomes homeless. Sixty-two percent of gay and transgender homeless youth attempt suicide compared to 29 percent of their heterosexual homeless peers.³

Lower educational attainment for gay and transgender homeless youth

Once gay and transgender youth become homeless, barriers to free and appropriate education arise. Not only do gay and transgender homeless youth have to deal with the harassment and discrimination associated with being gay and/or transgender, but they are presented with new obstacles to overcome due to being homeless.⁴ Despite federal laws in place protecting homeless youth's right to public education, residency requirements, guardianship requirements, lack of transportation, and access to health and other records can still prevent homeless youth from receiving a free public education.⁵ Moreover, homelessness hampers academic achievement due to frequent school transfers, lack of quiet, safe places to study, and hunger.⁶

Due to these and other factors, both gay and transgender homeless youth and homeless youth on the whole are reported to have high dropout rates,⁷ with one 2008 New York study of homeless youth finding that half of their respondents were high school dropouts.⁸ Additionally,

The Ruth Ellis Center, an organization that exclusively serves gay and transgender homeless youth in Detroit, reported in 2006 that more than 60 percent of their high school age youth population had dropped out of school due to bullying or discrimination.⁹

These educational challenges can have ramifications throughout a youth's life. It is impossible to know how much potential is lost when a homeless youth struggles and drops out of high school. A strategic investment in these youth could yield savings when they are productive members of the future workforce.

Physical and sexual assault suffered by gay and transgender homeless youth

Without the protection of a family, homeless youth are at risk of physical abuse and sexual exploitation. Thirty-three percent of heterosexual homeless youth in Midwestern cities reported experiencing sexual victimization,¹⁰ and another study found that 26 percent of heterosexual youth were asked by someone on the street to exchange sex for money, food, drugs, shelter, or clothes.¹¹

Gay and transgender homeless youth are more frequently targeted for this kind of greater physical abuse and sexual exploitation. A full 58 percent of gay homeless youth in those Midwestern cities had been sexually victimized.¹² And 44 percent of homeless gay youth reported being approached to engage in sex in order to meet their basic needs.

Mental health risks for gay and transgender homeless youth

The instability of homelessness causes physical and emotional stress for homeless youth. When combined with the stigma of a gay and/or transgender identity, this stress can cause youth to experience mental illness. A 2004 study of homeless youth found that gay homeless youth were more likely to suffer from major depression than heterosexual homeless youth, and lesbian homeless youth were more likely to have post-traumatic-stress syndrome than heterosexual homeless young women.¹³

Depression and low self-respect can also lead youth to engage in risky behaviors, such as drug use or unsafe sex. A 2006 study found that 42 percent of gay homeless youth abuse alcohol compared to 27 percent of heterosexual youth.¹⁴ The study also found that injection-drug use is significantly more common for gay homeless youth than heterosexual homeless youth.¹⁵ Homeless gay and transgender youth also report higher rates of unprotected sex than heterosexual homeless youth,¹⁶ as well as higher rates of HIV infection than heterosexual youth.¹⁷

* In this report the term gay is used as an umbrella term for all youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer.

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

Every child deserves a supportive and loving home. But for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children and youth, that home is not available.⁷ Gay and transgender youth are disproportionately represented among homeless youth in our country, experiencing extreme rates of violence, discrimination, and poor health while homeless.

This is happening at least partly because gay and transgender people are coming out at younger ages as society becomes increasingly supportive of equality. Twenty years ago, most people started coming out in their 20s, well after most had left home and started working. If someone's family rejected them for being gay or transgender, it may have been emotionally painful, but the person could still likely take care of himself or herself.

Today, the usual coming out age is in the midteen years, when youth still depend on their families to meet their material needs and are particularly vulnerable if their family outright rejects them. For gay and transgender youth in these situations, family rejection can lead to a chain reaction of events that sends them cascading through social safety nets that are not equipped to support them.

Indeed, too many youth who come out are rejected by their families, harassed and victimized in schools, discriminated against in out-of-home care facilities, and brutalized in homeless shelters. They often resort to criminal activity, such as theft or "survival sex" in order to survive. The high rates of rejection, violence, and institutional discrimination combined with hostile school environments and social prejudice lead to an over-representation of gay and transgender youth among the homeless youth population.

The federal government can and should do more to respond to this problem. Of the approximately \$4.2 billion the government spends annually on homeless assistance programs, less than 5 percent of this funding, \$195 million, is allocated for homeless children and youth. Even less actually goes to serve unaccompanied homeless youth. Further, each year the federal government spends \$44 billion on rental assistance, public housing, and affordable housing programs, yet less than 1 percent of these funds, only \$44 million, is allocated for homeless youth housing assistance.¹⁸

⁷ In this report the term gay is used as an umbrella term for all youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer.

There are currently no federal programs specifically designed to meet the needs of gay and transgender homeless youth, and there are no federal protections, and few state laws, in place to keep these youth from being discriminated against while accessing federally funded homeless services.

What's worse, federal grant awards for homeless youth services are being awarded to providers without mandating that they not discriminate based on sexual orientation and gender identity, leaving vulnerable youth open to harassment from staff and other residents. Nor are these grantees required to abide by basic standards of gay and transgender health care. In short, the lack of inclusive policies and targeted resources for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in federal grants prevents this population from having equal access to federally funded services.

The federal government can take several steps to reduce the incidence of gay and transgender youth homelessness and improve the services and treatment these youth receive if they do become homeless. Specifically, the Obama administration should:

- Strengthen families with gay and transgender children through evidence-based support services so youth do not become homeless. The Administration for Children and Families should develop programs that help families from all communities support and nurture their gay and transgender children to promote positive development and connection to families and communities.
- Establish schools as a safe haven for all youth, including gay and transgender youth. The Department of Education should address the role of unsafe schools in promoting youth homelessness, and aggressively address school bullying. They should also take all possible steps to ensure that homeless youth are able to continue their education.
- Acknowledge and protect those youths who continue to fall through the cracks. The first step to do this is an executive order recognizing both lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender homeless youth and homeless youth in general as special-needs populations, and protecting them from discrimination by federal grantees.
- Take concrete steps to expand housing options for gay and transgender homeless youth through Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Housing and Urban Development programs.
- Initiate research in this area as gay and transgender youth homelessness, and the programs to address it, are not being adequately tracked or documented. Affirming data-collection methods for homeless gay and transgender youth should be established for all federal programs serving homeless youth. Programs to address homeless youth must be rigorously evaluated to understand what works.

Taken together, the five steps outlined above would create a coherent and consistent federal response to the crisis of gay and transgender homeless youth, which is critically needed at this time. As our nation's society becomes more supportive of gay and transgender issues and youth come out at earlier ages, the federal government must step up and respond to the needs of these youths.

This report offers a blueprint for approaching this work. In the pages that follow, we will examine gay and transgender youth homelessness against the backdrop of overall youth homelessness in America and show the extreme levels of discrimination and violence many gay and transgender youth face at home, in school, in youth and adult homeless shelters and on the streets. We will specifically examine the many failing safety nets for these youth, and then demonstrate why our recommendations, if implemented, would do much to help ensure that all youth have a chance at a happy and healthy future.

Overall U.S. youth homelessness

Youth homelessness in the United States is a national crisis affecting heterosexual, gay, and transgender youth across the country. Homeless youth are commonly identified as unaccompanied youth ages 12 to 24 who are on their own without familial support or a stable and adequate residence. Runaway youth are also counted as part of the homeless youth population in this report due to their inclusion in the majority of homeless-youth studies.

Homeless youth live in shelters, on the streets, in inhabitable locations such as cars and abandoned buildings, or in unstable housing situations for short periods of time—commonly known as couch surfing.¹⁹ Compared to the larger homeless youth community, gay and transgender youth often suffer from the most extreme discrimination and violence.

Total homeless youth population

Youth homelessness is occurring nationwide in urban, suburban, and rural communities.²⁰ Estimates of the total number of homeless youth in the United States vary widely, with different studies reporting the population of homeless youth ages 12 to 24 between 1.6 million and 2.8 million.²¹ Of these youth, the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that more than 100,000 youth are homeless for an extended period of time, with the rest homeless for shorter periods.²² For youth ages 12 to 17, national studies estimate that there are between 1.6 million and 1.7 million who experience homelessness each year.²³

In 2004, the Office of Applied Studies in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration released “The National Survey on Drug Use and Health Report: Substance Use among Youth Who Had Run Away from Home.” The report found that in 2002 approximately 1.6 million youth ages 12 to 17 had run away from home and slept on the streets.²⁴ The report’s homeless youth population findings correspond with several earlier studies conducted in the late 1990s. According to the second National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Throwaway Children, approximately 1.7 million youth under 18 years of age experienced homelessness in 1999.²⁵ Additionally, a 1998 national study of 6,500 youth aged 12 to 17 found that approximately 7.6 percent had reported being homeless for at least one night during the previous 12 months.²⁶ This percentage would mean that each year approximately 1.6 million youths ages 12 to 17 experience homelessness.²⁷

Pathways to homelessness

Abuse, neglect, and family conflict are the main causes of youth homelessness,²⁸ with youth reporting severe family conflict as the main reason they are homeless.²⁹ Conflicts arise from a number of sources; abuse, school problems, pregnancy, sexual orientation, and gender identity are found to be the most common issues cited.³⁰

Homeless youth also cite lack of affordable housing options, incomplete education, inaccessible job markets, and ongoing drug use as reasons for homelessness.³¹ Additionally, larger social factors such as poverty, institutionalized discrimination, and incarceration are also noted to be factors contributing to youth homelessness.³²

Consequences of youth homelessness

Homeless youth in the United States face significant health challenges and are at high risk of sexual and physical victimization.³³ Compared to their nonhomeless peers, homeless youth are at increased risk of physical and sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, chemical and alcohol dependency, mental health problems, and early mortality.³⁴

This is the case even though studies show that many homeless youth do not experience long-term homelessness.³⁵ According to a seven-year longitudinal study of 249 homeless youth ages 13 to 17, 93 percent of those surveyed were no longer homeless after the seven-year study was concluded.³⁶ Yet experiencing homelessness itself can have severe physical and mental health consequences. Homelessness in adolescence can lead to the development of serious mental and physical health problems, and can affect the normal development and long-term attainment of youth.³⁷ Additionally, without appropriate intervention services, homeless youth are at increased risk of early mortality.³⁸

An overview of homelessness among gay and transgender youth

Consistent research finds that gay and transgender youth are strikingly over-represented among homeless youth. Although there are no nationally representative surveys that give an accurate count of the population of gay and transgender youth who are homeless, regional studies have been used to estimate that population size. Studies from various jurisdictions over the last decade (see Table 1) have found that gay and transgender youth comprise between 7 and 39 percent of the homeless youth population, although they are only thought to make up between 5 to 7 percent of the overall youth population. The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that gay and transgender youth make up about 20 percent of homeless youth nationwide, and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has suggested that the number may be as high as 40 percent.³⁹

Given that between 1.6 million and 2 million youth experience homelessness each year, and gay and transgender youth make up about 20 percent of these youths, it is estimated that there are about 320,000 to 400,000 gay and transgender youth who experience homelessness at some point each year. It is important to note these numbers predate the start of the current economic recession and likely underestimate the current number of homeless youth. Economic troubles often exacerbate family stresses while at the same time straining state social service budgets. Those more at risk of becoming homeless, especially gay and transgender youth, are thus more likely to leave their homes, and less likely to find safety nets after they leave.

Despite tremendous obstacles and extreme violence and discrimination, some gay and transgender homeless youth have been able to overcome these challenges and move out of homelessness despite all odds. Consider Justin Reed Early (see box), a formerly homeless youth who survived the streets and attained economic stability and professional success.

TABLE 1
Homelessness Among Gay and Transgender Youth

A sample of studies from around the country between 2000 and 2008

Location	Estimated percentage of homeless population	Age range of study	Study author (date)
Los Angeles, CA	25 percent gay and/or transgender	12 to 20	Solorio (2006)
New York, NY	28 percent gay 5 percent transgender	13 to 24	Freeman (2008)
IL statewide	15 percent gay	12 to 21	Johnson (2005)
Chicago	23 percent gay		
Cook County	22 percent gay		
Seattle, WA	7 percent gay and/or transgender	13 to 21	Cauce (2000)
Seattle, WA	39 percent gay and/or transgender	13 to 23	Wagner (2001)
Seattle, WA	22 percent gay	13 to 21	Cochran and others. (2002)
St. Paul, MN	12 to 17 percent gay	Under 21	Owen (2003)
St. Paul, MN	9 to 14 percent gay and/or transgender	Under 21	Owen (2006)
TX	36 percent gay	15 to 22	Rew (2001)
IA, MO, and KS	15 percent gay	16 to 19	Whitbeck (2004)
CO, IL, MN, MO, and UT	22 percent gay	Under 25	Van Leeuwen (2006)

Source: The National Alliance to End Homelessness

Justin Reed Early

Suffering from mental and physical abuse at home, Justin Early was only 10 years old when he ran away from home and began living on the streets in Seattle. He soon learned that in order to survive, he needed to engage in “survival sex” for food, clothing, and a place to stay during cold nights. Early first engaged in survival sex when he was 11 years old.

The streets of Seattle were unforgiving. He routinely engaged in desperate acts just to stay alive, soon earning him “criminal” status. He was arrested several times and was told by a judge that if he was caught again, he would spend time in state prison. Fearing incarceration, Early moved

to San Francisco in hopes of finding a more welcoming city to call home. Instead, he was met with a relentlessly violent and hostile street life.

Despite all obstacles, Early was able to move off the streets and eventually became a successful assistant for celebrities in Los Angeles. His story is unique in that he was able to overcome the myriad of challenges that defined his adolescence, “street life, drug addiction, his family’s prejudices, his own internalized homophobia, coming out, HIV, and the loss of countless friends and family.” He eventually authored a memoir entitled *Streetchild: An Unpaved Passage* that documents his experience.⁴⁰

Demographics of gay and transgender homeless youth

A survey of youth in New York City found that gay and transgender youth first become homeless very young, with an average age of 14 and four months for gay youth and 13 and five months for transgender youth. That research also suggests that homeless gay and transgender youth are disproportionately youth of color. Among the homeless youth who identified as gay, 44 percent were black and 26 percent were Hispanic. The transgender homeless youth were even more likely to be people of color. Sixty-two percent were black, and 20 percent were Hispanic.⁴¹

Many service organizations that provide shelter and services to gay and transgender homeless youth are also reporting high rates of youth of color among their clients, among them:

- The Ruth Ellis Center, a shelter and support service organization for gay and transgender homeless youth in Detroit, which reports that 99 percent of their clients are youth of color⁴²
- The Green Chimneys Triangle Tribe Apartments Transitional Living Program for gay and transgender homeless youth in New York City, which reports that from 2000 to 2006 approximately 80 percent of their client population were youth of color⁴³
- The Ali Forney Center in New York City, which reports that the majority of their clients are youth of color who have been rejected from their families⁴⁴
- The Waltham House, a group home for gay and transgender homeless youth in Waltham, Massachusetts, which reports that from 2002 to 2005 approximately 33 percent of its client population were youth of color⁴⁵

Why gay and transgender youth are disproportionately homeless

Youth are coming out as gay and transgender at younger ages, often to families who have little guidance on how to support positive development for gay and transgender children, and educators and service providers who are equally unprepared. This combination is causing higher rates of family rejection and conflict and pushing many gay and transgender youth into homelessness. Once gay and transgender youth are homeless, the social safety nets designed to protect children and youth from the harsh brutality of the streets are failing them. The youth are vulnerable for discrimination and abuse in foster care, juvenile justice facilities, and homeless shelters, as well as neglect and mistreatment by health centers.

The failure of social safety nets combined with severe social and institutional discrimination is causing gay and transgender youth to be disproportionately represented among the homeless youth population. This is particularly tragic because as more and more gay and transgender youth come out at developmentally critical ages their unique needs to manage stigma, discrimination, and prejudice are often neglected and misunderstood by providers who are ill trained to serve them.

Modern gay and transgender youth: Out in middle school

The advancement of gay and transgender equality over the past 40 years has made accurate and positive information about being gay and/or transgender more widely available, enabling people to identify as gay and/or transgender at younger ages. Researchers have found that the average age of coming out as lesbian or gay has been steadily dropping since the 1970s.⁴⁶

In the 1970s, the average age people realized their lesbian or gay identity was between ages 14 to 16, and they then came out after high school when they were between 19 to 24 years old. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the average age for identity realization dropped between ages 9 and 10, with youth coming out predominately in high school at ages 14 to 16.⁴⁷ The average age of coming out has continued to drop since the 1990s. Adolescents studied by researchers from the Family Acceptance Project self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, on average, at age 13.4 and a number of them knew they were gay at ages 5 to 7.⁴⁸

Note that this data applies only to sexual orientation, and not gender identity. Unfortunately, data on when youth first identify as transgender is sparse, but emerging research suggests that many transgender youth increasingly identify as lesbian or gay before identifying as transgender.⁴⁹

As cultural awareness and acceptance of gay and transgender people continues to increase, it is likely that coming-out ages will continue to drop until they are congruous with average child identity development.⁵⁰

Family rejection and social discrimination

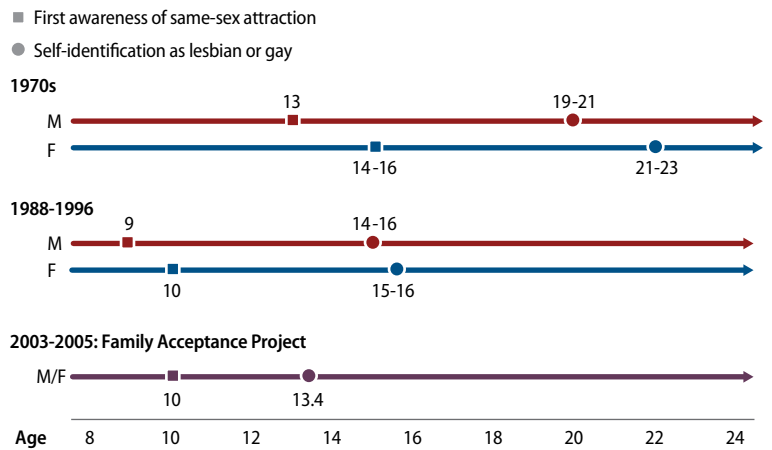
As gay and transgender youth come out at younger ages, they are being met with rejection, violence, abuse, and social prejudice.⁵¹

The family structure is a young person's first safety net from homelessness. Youth under 18 are legally bound to their parents or guardians, and the majority of these youth and children depend on their parents or guardians for food, housing, emotional support, and financial security. When a minor child or youth comes out to their family, they are at increased risk of homelessness due to family rejection, conflict, abuse, and neglect.

Multiple studies have found that gay and transgender youth may be at increased risk for homelessness due to conflict with their family about their identity as gay or transgender.⁵² A study of homeless youth in Seattle found that gay youth were more likely to leave their homes due to physical abuse or conflict over their sexual orientation than their heterosexual homeless counterparts. Gay and transgender youth had also left home more times in the past than had their heterosexual peers. Sixty-two percent of those gay youth reported that their families discriminated against them, compared to 30 percent of their heterosexual peers.⁵³ A study of homeless youth in Minnesota found that 25 percent of gay and transgender homeless youth cited family rejection as the primary cause of their homelessness.⁵⁴ According to a study of gay youth in the Midwest, 39 percent of gay teens reported leaving their homes due to conflict with their parents about their sexual orientation.⁵⁵

Family rejection too often escalates to violence. Seventy-seven percent of clients at the Ali Forney Center reported they had experienced physical or emotional abuse, including assault, sexual assault, and even attempted murder at the hands of their families.⁵⁶

FIGURE 1
Average age range awareness of gay identity by generation



Source: Caitlin Ryan, "LGBT youth: Health concerns, services and care," *Serving Youth in Out of Home Care: CWLA Best Practices Guidelines*.

Learning how to prevent rejection

The Family Acceptance Project™

The Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University develops evidence-based interventions, educational materials, and training to help ethnically diverse families support their gay and transgender youth to strengthen families and promote their children's health and well-being.⁵⁷ FAP's groundbreaking research has shown for the first time how family rejection is linked with serious negative health and mental health outcomes for gay and transgender young people and how family acceptance protects against risk and promotes their children's well-being.

FAP is developing the first evidence-based family model of wellness, prevention, and care to help diverse families decrease behaviors that put their gay and transgender children at high risk for HIV, suicide, and substance abuse and to help promote self-esteem and wellness. FAP researchers have developed a series of provider and family self-assessment resources and tools, including an empirically derived rapid risk assessment tool to help health, mental health, and social service providers quickly identify gay and transgender young people at risk for family conflict that leads to ejection from their homes and for serious

health outcomes that FAP researchers have shown are related to family rejection. FAP works with families from many ethnic backgrounds and provides family services in English, Spanish, and Chinese.

Changing attitudes

The Family Acceptance Project's work is rapidly generating a shift in how health and mental health services and community groups approach gay and transgender youth. For instance, Greater Boston's Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays recently partnered with the Massachusetts PTA to include FAP's educational materials in the PTA back-to-school packets across the state of Massachusetts.

FAP is collaborating with faith-based institutions to disseminate their family education resources, with child welfare services to train child protective workers to identify youth at risk of being removed from their homes, and with county health agencies to train public health workers in their new family approach.

Discrimination in schools

Earlier coming-out ages also mean that gay and transgender youth are increasingly at risk in schools. Harassment and discrimination in schools exacerbate family conflicts over a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity, increasing the chance of homelessness.⁵⁸

In 2007, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network conducted a National School Climate Survey to determine how gay and transgender youth are treated in U.S. educational institutions. The study consisted of a sample of 6,209 gay and transgender middle and high school students, ages 13 to 21, from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Sixty-four percent of the students self-identified as white and 36 percent identified as people of color. Additionally, out of the 6,209 youth surveyed, 295 youth identified as transgender.

According to the survey, gay and transgender students in the United States are braving hostile and dangerous school environments where they hear homophobic comments on a regular basis, are verbally and physically victimized, feel unsafe, and feel unprotected by teachers and staff.⁵⁹ The study found that 60 percent of gay and transgender students reported feeling unsafe at school,⁶⁰ and 32 percent of gay and transgender youth reported missing a day of school due to feeling unsafe.⁶¹

Not surprisingly, gay and transgender students were twice as likely to miss school if they were frequently verbally harassed and three times as likely if they were frequent victims of physical harassment.⁶² The study further found that 86 percent of students surveyed reported being verbally harassed at school due to their sexual orientation and 66 percent due to their gender expression.⁶³ Forty-four percent of gay and transgender students reported being physically harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, and 30 percent because of their gender expression.

Additionally, 22 percent of gay and transgender students surveyed reported having been physically attacked in school (punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon).⁶⁴ The majority of these students (60 percent) did not report incidents of assault to school staff because they believed no one would care. Additionally, 31 percent of students who reported incidents of harassment and violence to staff did not receive a response.⁶⁵

Harassment in school also is affecting school performance and academic achievement. More than 40 percent of students who were frequently physically harassed did not plan on attending college, compared to 30 percent of those who did not experience high frequencies of harassment.⁶⁶ Gay and transgender students were also almost twice as likely not to finish high school or pursue college compared to the national average.⁶⁷

Other studies have confirmed these conclusions. An analysis of the California Healthy Kids Survey found that 8 percent of all middle and high school students reported being bullied or harassed because they were known or perceived to be gay. Students who were victimized were more than three times as likely to seriously consider suicide and to develop a suicide plan (a signal of serious intent) or to miss school because they felt unsafe. They were also more than twice as likely as heterosexual youth to report depression and to use stimulants or inhalants as were heterosexual youth.⁶⁸

Gay students in Massachusetts schools were more than four times as likely to have been threatened with a weapon at school, more than three times as likely to have been in a fight that required medical attention, nearly five times as likely to have missed school because they were afraid, and more than three times as likely to have attempted suicide during the past 12 months.⁶⁹

The Institute of Medicine has also found that school harassment and social discrimination can lead to increased risky behaviors among gay and transgender youth, including substance addiction, behavioral and mental health problems, and suicide attempts, all of which can lead to family conflict that can drive youth into homelessness.⁷⁰

Higher rates of victimization for transgender students

A separate report focusing on transgender-identified students participating in the 2007 National School Climate Survey found that these students are experiencing brutal school

environments, and are subjected to extreme levels of discrimination, harassment and victimization. The report found that while gay and transgender students report high levels of harassment and assault in school overall, transgender students experience even higher rates of victimization compared with nontransgender students.⁷¹

The report found that nearly all transgender students surveyed (89 percent) experienced verbal harassment and more than half (55 percent) had experienced physical harassment (pushed or shoved) in school due to their sexual orientation and/or gender expression.⁷² While no nationally representative samples of transgender youth exist, GLSEN's report gives insight into the harassment, violence, ignorance, hatred, and institutional discrimination that transgender youth face in schools across the nation.

Nowhere safe to go

Some gay and transgender youth who leave their homes seek assistance from secondary safety nets designed to keep children and youth off the streets such as foster care, health centers, and other youth-serving institutions.⁷³ But many of the agencies and centers designed to help children and youth in need are ill prepared or not safe for gay and transgender youth.

Gay and transgender homeless youth often also seek housing in adult homeless shelters, in unstable situations with friends and acquaintances (known as couch surfing) and on the streets.⁷⁴ Additionally, gay and transgender homeless youth have high rates of incarceration due to the criminalization of homelessness.⁷⁵ As is clear from our analysis below, none of the social safety nets in place for homeless youth is up to the task of helping gay and transgender homeless youth.

Child welfare systems perpetuating gay and transgender youth homelessness

Out-of-home care systems are demonstrably failing gay and transgender youth when they are most vulnerable to abuse. More than 500,000 children and youth are in state custody on any given day, living in foster care placement or juvenile justice facilities.⁷⁶ Gay and transgender youth enter these systems for a multitude of reasons that are not always related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many gay and transgender youth, however, enter state custody due to factors indirectly or directly related to those identities.

According to a study of family reactions to their gay and transgender children, 42 percent of the gay and transgender youth who ended up out of home, whether in child welfare or other systems, stated that they were either removed or rejected from their families due to conflict over their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁷⁷

Other direct reasons that are placing gay and transgender youth in state custody include:

- Rejection, abuse, and neglect by their families
- Runaway situations
- Incarceration due to conflict with their families
- School nonattendance due to harassment and discrimination
- Incarceration due to survival crimes⁷⁸

Unfortunately, child welfare institutions and foster care agencies also contribute to homelessness among gay and transgender youth due to institutional prejudice, lack of provider and foster parent training, and discrimination against gay and transgender youth by adults and peers.⁷⁹ A 1994 study of gay and transgender youth in the New York child welfare system found that 78 percent of them were either removed from or ran away from their foster care placements due to conflict and discrimination related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁸⁰ Furthermore, a later study of those youth found that more than two-thirds (70 percent) had been victims of violence because of their gay identity, and more than half said they lived on the streets where they felt safer than living in group or foster homes.⁸¹ Additionally, 64 percent of gay and transgender homeless youth surveyed in San Diego reported a history of foster care.⁸² Some gay and transgender homeless youth like Luisa (see box) have repeatedly endured rejection and discrimination in the foster care system.

Child welfare systems do not need to reflect institutional prejudice. Both Connecticut and Illinois have established statewide policies that specifically address the needs of gay and transgender youth.⁸³

Luisa

Luisa was raised in Southern California as the oldest daughter in a Latino immigrant family. She had ongoing fights with her parents over her dress and what her mother called “inappropriate” behavior.

Luisa came out at 13. The fights at home escalated. Luisa fought back and ended up in a foster care group home where the other girls ridiculed her, destroyed her clothes, and hit her repeatedly. The staff ignored Luisa’s calls for help, told her that she provoked the fights and “brought them on herself.” They often put Luisa in time out and isolation that they said was to protect her from the other girls.

Luisa became very depressed. Her family wouldn’t visit since her mother was concerned that Luisa’s behavior (her sexual orientation) might be contagious and would affect her younger daughters. Luisa ran away from the group home and lived on the streets where she was raped and beaten by several men. The adult shelters were usually full so she had found an abandoned building where she slept with a group of homeless teens who taught her some survival skills. Pregnant from the rape, Luisa found a placement in a homeless prenatal program where she was able to go to school, receive health care services, and prepare for the birth of her baby. By then Luisa learned that she had also been infected with HIV. She hoped her baby wouldn’t get infected, too.⁸⁴

Even if youth face no discrimination within the child welfare system, the process of legal emancipation, or “age out,” presents numerous challenges. Emancipated youth as a whole experience high rates of homelessness, with 12 percent to 36 percent of emancipated youth reporting that they experienced homelessness after leaving the system.⁸⁵ These youth lack family or community supports to turn to during difficult transition times, making it more difficult to find employment and affordable housing. For gay and transgender youth, who face discrimination and stigma as well, these challenges can be insurmountable.

Health care facilities are too often failing gay and transgender youth

Health centers should be serving as a safety net for gay and transgender homeless youth, providing them with physical and mental health services and agency referrals, but recent research suggests that many health facilities are not adequately serving the community.

According to “Adolescent Health Services,” a 2009 Institute of Medicine report, “few centers are specifically focused on the primary care needs of special subpopulations of adolescents, such as those who are in the foster care system, in families that have recently immigrated, or gay and/or transgender.”⁸⁶

The study further finds that the lack of quality and competent primary care services for gay and transgender youth reflects disparities and institutional inequalities of the health care system.⁸⁷

Homeless gay and transgender youth are at extreme risk of developing physical or mental health conditions, and need access to safe, culturally competent health services. This may include services such as inclusive sex education, condom access (and use education), HIV testing, and general health services.⁸⁸

Unfortunately, gay and transgender homeless youth face barriers to accessing competent health and mental health services including health care provider discrimination, lack of health insurance, lack of monetary resources, and lack of access to competent providers.⁸⁹ Without access to safe and supportive health and mental health care, LGBT homeless youth face life or death consequences.⁹⁰

Lack of health services for transgender youth

Transgender youth in particular need access to experienced, trained, and transgender-affirming health and mental health providers. Yet transgender youth are facing serious barriers to accessing needed care.⁹¹ There are very few services providers that offer competent and affirming medical and mental health services to homeless transgender youth and adults nationwide.

Many transgender people experience discrimination and maltreatment from service providers when trying to access basic health care services. Moreover, medical providers not properly trained to serve transgender clients often fail to provide adequate health care services including screenings for illnesses corresponding to the client’s birth-assigned gender.

Lack of access to transition-related health care

Transgender youth may need or desire transition-related medical services to assist them with medically transitioning to the gender they identify as.⁹² This may or may not include the desire for hormonal therapy or sex reassignment surgeries, which are almost always not funded by medical insurance providers, including federal health programs such as Medicaid and many state-level health programs.⁹³ Some state and local health programs, such as Medi-Cal, do cover these treatments.

Denying transgender youth access to service providers that can assist them with transition-related health care is resulting in some youth turning to street suppliers for desired transition treatments such as hormone therapy and silicone injections.⁹⁴ Transition-related treatments without proper medical supervision can cause catastrophic health complications. Unmonitored street-purchased hormone therapy treatments can place transgender youth at higher risk of HIV and hepatitis from using possibly contaminated needles, as well as at risk of liver damage and other health complications.⁹⁵ And injections of industrial-grade silicone into areas of the body can cause disfiguration, respiratory illness, systemic illness, and even death.⁹⁶

Homeless shelters are failing gay and transgender youth

When gay and transgender youth fall through the safety nets designed to keep youth from homelessness, their last line of defense against living on the streets are adult- or youth-oriented homeless shelters. Sadly, rather than finding refuge, safety, and care in shelters, too many gay and transgender homeless youth face discrimination and violence.

In a 2007 report, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force released striking anecdotal evidence that gay and transgender youth experience high rates of harassment and discrimination in homeless shelter organizations. The research cited reports from the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit that transgender youth were being discriminated against in other Detroit service organizations.⁹⁷ They noted that youth were being denied access to shelter at specific service organizations if they did not dress as their birth-assigned gender.⁹⁸

Additionally, another Michigan facility was found to have made gay and transgender youth dress in orange to identify them from straight youth.⁹⁹ According to a service provider for gay and transgender youth in Massachusetts, clients had reported being kicked out of other shelters in the state due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.¹⁰⁰ In New York City, gay and transgender youth reported being frequently discriminated against and physically assaulted at certain faith-based shelter organizations.¹⁰¹

Some of this discrimination takes the form of open discrimination and harassment via shelter policies. More often, shelter staff and residents harass gay and transgender youth despite shelter policies. A less severe form of discrimination comes from well-meaning

shelter staff who are not well trained in what policies and services are necessary to promote the development of gay and transgender youth. A shelter with any of these forms of discrimination ceases to be a safe place for gay and transgender youth.

One solution to this problem are homeless shelters dedicated to gay and transgender youth. Unfortunately, there are very few of these shelters. Says the founder of one of the leading shelters for gay and transgender youth, Carl Siciliano, “I doubt that there are even 200 [homeless shelter] beds in the country for LGBT youth, and there are thousands of LGBT youth, so it is a huge problem.”¹⁰²

Indeed, nationwide there is an extreme lack of emergency shelter and housing options for gay and transgender homeless youth like Siciliano’s Ali Forney Center (see box). The majority of organizations providing shelter and transitional housing options for these youth are geographically isolated, located in a few major urban areas.¹⁰³

The Ali Forney Center: A model for success

The Ali Forney Center is a place where gay and transgender homeless youth are safe and receive the guidance and support they need to make a smooth transition from homelessness to stability.¹⁰⁴ The center was established in 2002 in response to the large number of homeless gay and transgender youth who were being murdered on the streets of New York City. The Ali Forney Center is the largest homeless provider for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in the nation, and has developed an outstanding model of service for homeless youth. The Ali Forney Center serves LGBT youth ages 16 to 24, and provides a drop-in center, emergency and transitional housing, street outreach, physical and mental health treatment, educational programs, and a family acceptance program that provides counseling services to families of LGBT youth.¹⁰⁵

The Ali Forney Center operates a day center in Manhattan, offering street outreach, case management, medical care, mental health care, HIV testing, food, employment assistance, and referrals to the Ali Forney Center housing programs. The center offers both emergency and transitional housing options, with several emergency housing sites in New York City—providing a total of 28 emergency beds for LGBT youth needing

immediate housing assistance. All emergency housing units are safe, clean, staff-supervised apartments where youth sleep in beds. Youth are allowed to stay in the emergency housing program for up to six months while staff assist them in finding more long-term housing.¹⁰⁶

The Ali Forney Center also offers an excellent transitional housing program that prepares youth for financial stability and independent living. The transitional housing program currently offers apartment housing to 30 youth in New York City. Youth can stay in the transitional housing program for up to two years while they establish economic stability and the ability to move into permanent and independent living situations. All of the youth in transitional housing are currently employed, and three-quarters of them are currently in college.

The Ali Forney Center also operates a program that reaches out to families of LGBT youth to help them with accepting their child’s sexual orientation or gender identity.¹⁰⁷ The project supports and strengthens families through counseling, education, and community outreach services.

Transgender youth and shelter discrimination

Transgender youth suffer the most discrimination in homeless shelters. Transgender people of all ages are being turned away from homeless shelters due to prejudice and discrimination, according to a 2003 report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.¹⁰⁸ When admitted, most homeless shelters house individuals based on gender and few transgender people are housed according to the gender they identify as, which puts them at considerable risk for physical, sexual, and mental harassment and violence.¹⁰⁹ Some shelters have strict dress codes regarding gender expression, and transgender people may be forced to express a gender they are not comfortable with in order to receive shelter and services.

Lack of identity-affirming services in faith-based shelters

Faith-based organizations provide much-needed hunger and poverty social services. But some faith-based organizations serving homeless youth are either unwilling or unable to provide gay and transgender youth with the environment and support services they need for positive youth development.

According to a 2003 study of faith-based service providers in a representative sample of urban homeless women, lesbian women were only 60 percent as likely as heterosexual women to use faith-based services.¹¹⁰ This suggests that some faith-based organizations are not welcoming or supportive of gay and transgender youth. The study also found that faith-based organizations did not offer mental health services as frequently as secular service providers.¹¹¹ The study found that only 9 percent of faith-based services providers surveyed offered mental health services in contrast to 22 percent of secular service providers.¹¹²

These factors can prevent gay and transgender youth from accessing vital, life-saving services. Studies have found that many homeless gay and transgender youth choose to sleep on the streets rather than go to a service provider that is perceived to be homophobic or transphobic.¹¹³ Without access to this last safety net, gay and transgender youth are left to find shelter and subsistence on their own. As the next section of this report demonstrates, this leaves homeless gay and transgender youth to confront extreme risks on the streets.

“Life” on the street

Youth who end up on the streets face immense challenges and hazardous situations that endanger their lives. Like street youth as a whole, gay and transgender youth on the streets seek shelter in public places, abandoned buildings, cars, and in other places not suited for human habitation.¹¹⁴ In addition, each day gay and transgender homeless street youth must work to find shelter, food, and safe community while at constant risk of physical and sexual victimization.¹¹⁵

Homeless street youth are at high risk of exposure to severe weather, hunger, sexual and physical victimization, substance abuse, survival sex, and incarceration. Homeless youth are also at increased risk of criminalization for committing crimes related to being homeless, such as violating youth daytime-nighttime curfews and sleeping in public spaces.¹¹⁶ Homeless gay and transgender youth like T.T. Wilson (see box) are experiencing life-threatening conditions while living on the streets.

T.T. Wilson

After a conflict developed between T.T. Wilson and her affluent, conservative parents over her transgender identity, she ran away from her home in North Carolina after high school and made her way to New York City. She currently lives on the streets, frequently sleeping on a cold, wet bench at Union Square.

At 23, she recounts her childhood experience with her family. “My family don’t accept me for being gay. They don’t accept gay people, period.”

Many of her peers—mostly other transgender teens—engage in survival sex for food or a place to stay the night. For her part, T.T. has found some support at Sylvia’s Place, a shelter for gay and transgender youth at the Metropolitan Community Church of New York.¹¹⁷

Criminalization of homeless street youth

The nation's cities are not able to meet the growing demand for emergency shelter and homeless services. Instead of improving viable housing options, strengthening shelters, and fortifying public safety nets to prevent and reduce homelessness, many cities are using the criminal justice system to deal with rising rates of adult and youth homelessness.¹¹⁸ According to a 2009 report on the criminalization of homelessness in the United States, 30 percent of 235 U.S. cities surveyed prohibited sitting or lying down in public spaces, 47 percent prohibited loitering in specific public spaces, and 47 percent prohibited panhandling in public spaces.¹¹⁹

Recent studies also show evidence that many runaway and homeless youth become incarcerated by committing crimes related to homelessness, including supporting themselves through survival sex, robbery, shoplifting, and selling drugs.¹²⁰ Additionally, a 1998 study of young women in the juvenile justice system found that family and school conflict increased the probability of being detained.¹²¹ But some juvenile justice systems are addressing the needs of gay and transgender youth. After legal challenges led by the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, Hawaii and New York have established successful policies for gay and transgender youth in their juvenile justice systems.¹²²

Criminalizing homeless youth is not an effective or cost-efficient model for addressing youth homelessness. It is estimated that it costs approximately \$53,665 to maintain a youth in the criminal justice system for one year, but only \$5,887 to permanently move a homeless youth off the streets.¹²³

Discrimination once incarcerated

Gay and transgender youth in juvenile justice facilities face high rates of discrimination and harassment due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.¹²⁴ A 2005 study of assault within adult and juvenile correctional facilities found that gay and transgender youth report being verbally harassed and physically and sexually assaulted by the staff and other inmates.¹²⁵ The study further found that gay and transgender youth report not being protected from unwanted sexual advances by facility staff and are more likely than other inmates to be sexually assaulted while incarcerated.¹²⁶

Gay and transgender youth mobilize against criminalization

FIERCE is a gay and transgender youth of color empowerment and leadership organization in New York City that works to develop leaders through youth-led activist campaigns dedicated to ending all forms of oppression.¹²⁷

In the summer of 2000, FIERCE began organizing a campaign to address the high volume of arrests of homeless and nonhomeless lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth of color on the Christopher Street Pier in New York City. FIERCE developed the Save Our Space campaign to publicize the displacement and criminalization of LGBT youth of color and homeless youth at the pier.

The pier was closed in 2003 for revitalization, which included the expulsion of the homeless LGBT youth that called the pier home. While the pier was not a safe environment for youth to be living and congregating, it was seen to many to be one of the safest places for LGBT homeless youth in New York City.

FIERCE continues to speak up about the need for safe space for LGBT youth and homeless youth in New York City.

The federal response to gay and transgender youth homelessness

The federal government is not doing enough to strengthen safety nets for gay and transgender youth to keep them from becoming homeless. In particular, a lack of funding, standards for shelters and other social service organizations to ensure they understand the needs of gay and transgender youth, and nondiscrimination regulations nationwide are greatly contributing to the incidence and impact of gay and transgender youth homelessness.

This section of the report demonstrates that current federal youth homelessness programs are thoroughly inadequate to meet the crisis at hand, that the slow recovery from the Great Recession is only fueling gay and transgender youth homelessness, and that federal standards for youth homelessness today miss the mark by miles when it comes to protecting these youths when they are homeless. Understanding the vast limitations of the federal government's current approach to gay and transgender youth homelessness enables us to present more clearly our recommendations that follow.

Federal homeless youth programs: an overview

The Runaway Youth Act became law in 1974 and was reauthorized and renamed in 2003 the Runaway, Homeless and Missing Children Protection Act, commonly referred to as The Runaway Homeless Youth Act. RHYA was created to provide core services to homeless youth such as shelter, food, clothing, and medical care. The Family and Youth Services Bureau in the Department of Health and Human Services oversees RHYA.

The HHS Secretary awards RHYA funds in the form of grants to local faith-based and community organizations to provide services to homeless and runaway youth. Three programs receive funding under RHYA are the:

- **Basic Center Program.** BCP funds organizations to provide immediate short-term assistance to homeless youth under age 18. BCP support services include shelter, food, clothing, counseling, health care, and family reunification support.
- **Street Outreach Program.** SOP funds organizations that conduct direct outreach to youth on the streets. Services are directed at youth under age 21, and include street-based education, access to emergency shelter, treatment and counseling, crisis intervention, individual assessment, and information and referrals.

- **Transitional Living Program.** TLP provides funding for transitional housing services for homeless youth ages 16 to 21 for up to 18 months. Living accommodations may be with host families, group homes, or supervised apartments. Organizations provided with TLP grants must provide youth with safe, stable living environments, educational opportunities, medical and mental health care, job readiness preparation, substance abuse education, and opportunities to build basic life and interpersonal skills.

None of these programs are currently administered to specifically address the needs of gay and transgender homeless youth.

Homeless youth undoubtedly also use services funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Unfortunately, while HUD requires its grantees to document unaccompanied youth who are served, their definitions do not match those of HHS, and therefore it is difficult to understand how many youth are actually served with HUD funds. HUD also funds the Family Unification Program, which creates a path to Section 8 housing vouchers for low-income families whose children and youth were pushed into foster care or homelessness because of their families' housing insecurity. While this program is important, it does not address the family conflicts that are the primary driver of gay and transgender youth homelessness.

There's also the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which was enacted in 1987 as the first federal legislation to combat homelessness. The McKinney-Vento act offers nearly \$2 billion in funding for housing and supportive service to homeless populations, including supportive housing, shelters, and housing for persons with HIV/AIDS. Community based organizations serving homeless youth are eligible to apply for funding to expand outreach, supportive services, rental assistance, housing construction, and supportive housing to homeless youth populations.

Additionally, Title VII-B of the act enacted the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, which appropriates federal funds to states to ensure that homeless children and youth have equal access to public education. The law was also enacted to eliminate barriers that prevent homeless students from staying in school. These barriers include residency requirements, records requirements, guardianship requirements, and adequate transportation to school.¹²⁸ The Education for Homeless Children and Youth program of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was reauthorized in January 2002 through No Child Left Behind. McKinney-Vento education provisions serve both children who are homeless with their families and unaccompanied homeless youth. But the law fails to provide specific program assistance to gay and transgender homeless youth

Insufficient federal funding for homeless youth services

The federal government spends approximately \$4.2 billion annually on homeless assistance programs, yet less than 5 percent of this funding, \$195 million, is allocated for homeless children and youth, and even less goes specifically to unaccompanied homeless youth.¹²⁹ Additionally, each year the federal government spends \$44 billion on rental assistance, public housing, and affordable housing programs, yet less than 1 percent of these funds, only \$44 million, is allocated for homeless youth housing assistance.¹³⁰ Table 2 displays the fiscal year 2009 appropriations for all homeless youth services.

TABLE 2

Essential but insufficient: Current funding for youth homelessness

Federal program		
RHYA Basic Center Program	HHS	\$53.5 million
RHYA Street Outreach Program	HHS	\$17.7 million
RHYA Transitional Housing Programs	HHS	\$43.8 million
Family Unification Program (Section 8 vouchers for foster youth)	HUD	\$20.0 million
McKinney Education for Homeless Children	DOE	\$60.0 million
Total		\$195 million

Source: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Homeless youth are denied care

Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs were evaluated in 2006 by the Office of Management and Budget's Program Assessment Rating Tool. Under the Bush administration's PART performance evaluation system, the Office of Management and Budget answered 25 yes or no questions for each program under four categories:

- Program purpose and design
- Strategic planning
- Program management
- Program results.

The OMB then uses these answers to assign each program one of five ratings:

- Effective
- Moderately effective
- Adequate
- Ineffective
- Results not demonstrated (for a program that lacks adequate performance information or measures).

Using this methodology, RHYA programs were rated as "effective" programs.¹³¹

Other research and evaluations, however, conclude that these programs are severely underfunded and only serve a fraction of the homeless youth community. The Congressional Research Service, for example, released a report in 2006 stating that federally funded programs are only helping a small percentage of the homeless youth population.¹³² Additionally, few homeless youth self-report using support services, which means the programs are really only serving a small portion of the total number of homeless

youth. According to a 2000 study assessing the full range of services utilized among homeless youth, only 2 percent of homeless youth reported utilizing soup kitchen or outreach services, while 18 percent reported using inpatient or outpatient psychological services.¹³³

In fact, homeless youth in the United States are frequently denied services due to the shortage of shelter and housing programs across the nation. Local nonprofits do not have the capacity to offer the services necessary for early intervention and housing stability for the vast majority of homeless youth,¹³⁴ and the federal government is not allocating sufficient funds to RHYA programs, leaving many youth across the nation without assistance.

In FY 2008, for example, federally funded programs successfully made contact with more than 766,800 homeless youth through RHYA street outreach programs, but only 44,483 youth were given a bed in a shelter, and only 3,946 youth were placed in traditional housing units.¹³⁵ Also in FY 2008, at least 7,400 youth were turned away and denied RHYA-funded shelter and transitional housing services.¹³⁶

The recession and rising rates of youth homelessness

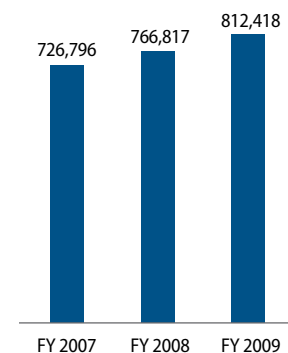
The number of contacts with runaway and homeless youth that federally funded outreach programs made from FY 2007 to FY 2009 may indicate that youth homelessness is on the rise.¹³⁷ In FY 2007, RHYA-funded street outreach programs made contact with 726,796 homeless and runaway youth. In FY 2008 this number increased to 766,817 contacts, and increased again in FY 2009 to 812,418 contacts. Figure 2 outlines the increases in Street Outreach Program contacts from FY 2007 to FY 2009.

An increase in youth homelessness is consistent with national reports of rising rates of overall homelessness due to the economic recession. During the 2008-09 school year, public schools enrolled nearly 1 million homeless children and youth—a 40 percent increase from the 2006-07 school year. The U.S. economic crisis forced families and youth into homelessness, and caused many more families economic stress and hardship.¹³⁹ In addition to causing the surge in homelessness, the Great Recession has led the majority of state governments to slash social service programs that helped people stay off the streets.¹⁴⁰

Increases in the number of families and youth in need of homeless services in combination with the reduction in social services by state governments may be resulting in an increase in the number of homeless children and youth nationwide.¹⁴¹ Local homeless organizations do not have the capacity to meet the growing need for homeless youth services, and the federal government's current financial investment in homeless youth assistance is inadequate, and will not be sufficient to stem rising rates of youth homelessness.¹⁴²

FIGURE 2
Federal engagement with homeless youth

The number of contacts made by homeless youth through the Department of Health and Human Services' Street Outreach Program, by fiscal year



Source: Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System, as of January 2010.¹³⁸

Gay and transgender youth and federally funded programs

Of the federal and state funding going to homeless youth services, only a fraction is going to programs designed to effectively help gay and transgender homeless youth. Increasing funding and investment in overall homeless youth services is vital in order to end overall youth homelessness, but this may or may not effectively help to reduce gay and transgender youth homelessness.

There are currently no federal programs specifically designed to meet the needs of gay and transgender homeless youth, and there are no protections in place to keep gay and transgender youth from being discriminated against while accessing federally funded homeless services.

Indeed, federal grants are being awarded to homeless youth serving organizations without mandating that they not discriminate based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In fact, many faith-based organizations explicitly act on antigay and antitransgender beliefs. While the federal government should not interfere with religious groups' belief systems, groups that participate in federal programs and the government officials who administer these programs should be more mindful of the first amendment requirement of the separation of church and state, and the fact that without care, these organizations' beliefs may prevent them from providing certain populations with the most medically sound care possible.

Beyond straightforward discrimination, grantees are not required to abide by basic standards of care for gay and transgender people. Grantee organizations often lack training on how to effectively serve gay and transgender homeless youth, and there is currently no form of certification to prove that grantees can competently provide care to these vulnerable youth.

In fact, the lack of policies that address gay and transgender youth attached to the distribution of federal grants to deal with homelessness is prohibiting gay and transgender youth from having equal access to federally funded services.

This is particularly the case with some faith-based organizations that receive federal grants. There are, of course, many faith-based organizations that are welcoming and inclusive of gay and transgender people, but none are obligated to be so. That's a problem because many of the organizations that receive federal funding to administer homeless services are faith-based organizations. In 2005, under the Bush administration, approximately \$2.2 billion of competitive social services grants went to faith-based organizations.¹⁴³ The Obama administration continued this program, stating in an executive order that "faith-based and other neighborhood organizations are vital to our nation's ability to address the needs of low-income and other underserved persons and communities."¹⁴⁴

Faith-based organizations clearly provide much-needed hunger and poverty social services. But some faith-based organizations serving homeless youth are either unwilling or unable to provide gay and transgender youth with the environment and support services they need for positive youth development. Discrimination by faith-based organizations can take several forms. Some will turn away gay and transgender youth completely. More often, they will let gay

and transgender youth in but then discipline youth for exercising their gay and transgender identity or sending them to sexual orientation conversion therapy. This kind of treatment violates sound child welfare principles.

Both Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children and the Salvation Army's Social Services for Children program both established policies in the past decade that directly invoke their religious mission in the day-to-day provision services.¹⁴⁵ These religious missions would demand discrimination against gay and transgender youth.

Promoting standards of care for gay and transgender youth

There are clear standards of care and safety policies that can ensure the safety and positive development of gay and transgender youth while accessing services. Comprehensive standards of care for gay and transgender youth were created in 2009 by a coalition of advocacy organizations titled, "National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth."¹⁴⁶

The standards call for providers to treat gay and transgender youth with respect and guarantee their safety, affirm their identities, support their access to identity-affirming educational opportunities as well as physical and mental health care services, and effectively support and affirm all transgender youth in their care.¹⁴⁷

Unfortunately, these standards have not been adopted by the federal government in any of its homelessness programs for youth. Indeed, there are no standards in place right now to ensure that gay and transgender youth accessing care at general shelter and transitional housing programs have equal access to housing services, and are not discriminated against or automatically isolated because of their gay and transgender identity.¹⁴⁸

This is an even more acute problem for transgender homeless youth. Discrimination against transgender youth often begins at intake, and can intensify around sleeping quarters, bathrooms, and locker rooms, where they experience discrimination, verbal harassment, and sometimes physical assault. For example, a transgender woman may be assigned to all-male sleeping quarters, exposing her to brutality from other residents. It is important to respect transgender youth's choices of which facilities to use, whether they identify as male, female, or neither.¹⁴⁹

Organizations providing services to gay and transgender homeless youth should be committed to an antiracist service model that effectively responds to racial discrimination and provides culturally competent, affirmative services.¹⁵⁰ Since many gay and transgender homeless youth are youth of color, federal agencies should encourage local organizations to recognize how racism can compound the issues that face these youth. But as it stands, the lack of dedicated federal attention to gay and transgender homeless youth means that these compounding issues too often go unaddressed.

Policy recommendations

The federal government can take several steps to reduce the incidence of gay and transgender homeless youth and improve the services and treatment gay and transgender youth receive if they do become homeless. Specifically, the Obama administration should:

- Strengthen and support families with gay and transgender children so youth do not become homeless
- Establish schools as a safe refuge for all children and youth
- Address the needs of those youths who continue to fall through the cracks
- Take concrete steps to expand housing options for gay and transgender homeless youth
- Initiate research in this area as gay and transgender youth homelessness is not being adequately tracked or documented

Taken together, these five steps would create a coherent and consistent federal response to the crisis of gay and transgender homeless youth, which is critically needed at this time. Let's now consider each of them in more detail.

Strengthen and support families with gay and transgender kids with evidence-based programs

The Obama administration and Congress should reinforce the social safety nets that too often fail gay and transgender youth. The most important of the institutions is the family. The administration should request funding to create and support a healthy families program that provides inclusive counseling services for families in which kids come out as gay or transgender. This work would provide general family counseling programs, family acceptance and reunification programs, and empowerment and enrichment programs for gay and transgender youth—all with the goal of reducing the number of youth being made homeless due to family rejection and conflict over a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity.

These pilot programs should be funded to develop effective partnerships between organizations that receive Basic Center Program grants and key community organizations, including schools, gay and transgender community centers, and other social service providers. RHYA authorizes the Family and Youth Services Bureau to provide grants to programs that include “home-based services for families with youth at risk of separation

from the family.”¹⁵¹ Congress should specifically appropriate \$3 million over three years to fund such programs for gay and transgender youth, and the research and family intervention development work, such as that of the Family Assistance Project, which will ensure that they are evidence based and address the specific needs of ethnically diverse families to guarantee their success.

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

The other institution in our society that too often pushes gay and transgender youth onto the streets are our schools. Schools are a refuge for students, but too often they are overrun by bullying and harassment based on gender identity and sexual orientation. The Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools and Office of Civil Rights should pursue this goal. The Department of Justice should also continue to use its Title IX authority, which it has used to address discrimination in schools based on sex and gender identity, to address school bullying. And Congress should promote policies protecting students from bullying and harassment based on both gender identity and sexual orientation nationwide.

Specifically, Congress should enact the Safe Schools Improvement Act and Student Nondiscrimination Act. The Safe Schools Improvement Act would require schools receiving federal funding to implement policies prohibiting bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity. It would also require states to report bullying and harassment data to the Department of Education. The bill is sponsored by Rep. Linda Sanchez (D-CA), along with 100 co-sponsors, and has been referred to the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education.

The Student Nondiscrimination Act would establish an explicit right to education free of harassment on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The bill is sponsored by Rep. Jared Polis (D-CO) and Senator Al Franken (D-MN), and has 100 co-sponsors in the House and 22 in the Senate. It has been referred to the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education and the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. Both bills should be incorporated into the next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Acknowledge and protect gay and transgender homeless youth who fall through the cracks

The Obama administration and Congress should help the youth who fall through the cracks. President Obama can begin this effort by issuing an executive order calling for a national strategy to address homeless youth, and requiring all relevant agencies to recognize unaccompanied homeless youth in general, and specifically lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender homeless youth as special needs populations.

The executive order must also address discrimination against gay and transgender youth specifically. It should first explicitly forbid discrimination across all relevant federal agencies, including HUD, HHS, the Department of Labor, Department of Education, and Department of Justice, by faith-based and other grant recipients against these youth, and offer a means to enforce this.

Congress should include nondiscrimination policies that are inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity in future reauthorizations of RHYA and McKinney-Vento, to ensure that these protections remain permanent. Finally, Congress can play an essential role in raising awareness about this issue by continuing to hold hearings to discuss the problems facing gay and transgender homeless youth and the problem of family rejection, for youth who stay in homes and those who experience homelessness.

Expand housing options for gay and transgender homeless youth

The White House should call on the Interagency Council on Homelessness to develop a coordinated strategy to address youth homelessness, with targeted policies to address gay and transgender homeless youth. The development of the strategy should heavily engage HHS and HUD, as well as the Departments of Labor and Education, whose programs may serve homeless youth as well. It should also incorporate feedback from current service providers, community leaders, and homeless youth themselves.

The plan should address a number of challenges that currently hamper cross-agency cooperation to fix this problem. The first of these is the fact that there is not a common definition of unaccompanied homeless youth across agencies. From the baseline of a definition, the Interagency Council should develop a “continuum of care” plan for unaccompanied youth. The National Alliance to End Homelessness has developed such a plan that may serve as a model for this strategy.¹⁵²

The strategy should also go beyond simple nondiscrimination policies to establishing affirmative cultural competency training on issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, and ethnicity for grant recipients that work to prevent youth homelessness as well as to provide shelter for youth who are homeless.¹⁵³ Finally, the plan should recognize the need to support targeted programs for gay and transgender youth.

While some of the recommendations in this strategy could be implemented administratively, many will require additional funding. The president and Congress should support these efforts by including increased funds for RHYA and other programs that help homeless youth in the federal budget. Congress should follow through by implementing the Interagency Council’s recommendations in the Labor-HHS and Transportation-HUD appropriations bills.

Appropriators can specifically address gay and transgender homeless youth by setting aside funds for successful programs that serve gay and transgender youth, to be determined by HHS

and HUD. They should also appropriate funds for cultural competency training for RHYA grantees, as part of the promotion of “positive youth development” required in that act.

Finally, future reauthorizations of RHYA should explicitly mandate cultural competency for providers of homeless youth services.

Initiate research on gay and transgender youth homelessness

The Obama administration and Congress should initiate research on gay and transgender youth homelessness as part of a broader research agenda on the challenges and realities that face gay and transgender youth and adults. This broad research agenda should address the developmental needs, health disparities, and educational and workplace challenges for gay and transgender Americans, with the goal of developing research-driven solutions to these (and other) issues and challenges. While scholars like Caitlin Ryan and Gary Mallon have started to develop research on these issues, the area requires deeper and broader investigation. HHS should join with the Department of Education, HUD, Labor, the Census Bureau, and others to develop a coherent research strategy.

But targeted research on gay and transgender homeless youth should not be lost in a broader research agenda. Accurate data collection to determine the actual size and program needs of gay and transgender homeless youth is critical in order to successfully target services and monitor program effectiveness.

HHS currently has the authority to provide grants for this kind of research under RHYA, which specifically prioritizes research grants to “carry out projects that serve diverse populations of runaway or homeless youth.” Identity-affirming data collection methods for gay and transgender homeless youth should also be established for all federal programs serving homeless youth. For example, HUD should update the Homeless Management Information System to include data on sexual orientation and gender identity, and that data should be comparable to similar data which has begun to be collected in the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System. In order to ensure accuracy of these data, the departments must train service providers in how to effectively ask about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Congress should specifically appropriate the necessary funds to make these changes. In the next reauthorization of RHYA, they should specifically include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth as a priority group for the purposes of research.

Conclusion

Gay and transgender youth are far more at risk of becoming homeless and are thus over-represented among all homeless youth. Gay and transgender youth are disproportionately homeless due to family conflict and overt discrimination when seeking alternative housing. Moreover, widespread discrimination in federally funded institutions is actively contributing to the catastrophic rates of homelessness among gay and transgender youth.

Once homeless, these youth experience greater physical and sexual exploitation than their heterosexual counterparts.

The federal government has the power to implement a number of programs to reduce and eventually eliminate the over-representation of gay and transgender youth among the nation's homeless population as well as to eliminate youth homelessness entirely.

It will take a financial commitment to end youth homelessness, a legislative will to expand equal rights and protections to all gay and transgender people, and a pledge that federal funds will no longer finance discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

But that should be in no short supply in our nation's capital. No child or youth should be discriminated against for being gay and/or transgender, and no child or youth should be kicked out or forced to leave their home due to conflict over their sexual orientation or gender identity. The federal government can remedy these problems. And when gay and transgender youth do become homeless, whatever the reason might be, the federal government has the capacity to ensure that they are safe and cared for across our country.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Caitlin Ryan of the Family Acceptance Project, Carl Siciliano of the Ali Forney Center, Flor Bermudez and Jeff Rakover of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, and Richard Hooks Wayman of the National Alliance to End Homelessness for their careful review and suggestions for this report. We would also like to thank current and former colleagues Mark Greenberg, Winnie Stachelberg, Ed Paisley, Annie Schutte, Valerie Shen, Christopher Contreras, Bret Evans, and Will Nevius for their guidance and support in the writing of this report.

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