

Homeless LGBTQ Youth

Mary Cunningham, Michael Pergamit, Nan Astone, Jessica Luna

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Researchers and practitioners across the country are working to improve data on homeless youths. As they collect data one consistent finding is that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youths are overrepresented in the homeless population. Though it's hard to get precise numbers, researchers estimate that LGBTQ youths make up 20 to 40 percent of the homeless youth population but only 4 to 10 percent of the general youth population (Cray, Miller, and Durso 2013). Even the more conservative estimate suggests LGBTQ youths are at higher risk for homelessness than other youths.

Why is this true? Research shows that since the 1970s, LGBTQ youths are coming out earlier, usually in their teens, rather than waiting until after they leave their parents' home (Quintana, Rosenthal, and Kreheley 2010). On the one hand, coming out earlier is a positive trend because it suggests that society is sending encouraging messages to young people that affirm their gender identity and sexual orientation. On the other hand, as Jeff Kreheley of the Center for American Progress states, "it means they [LGBTQ youths] are getting societal cues that it's ok to be gay, but they are not old enough to be able to live independently yet, and they face rejection by parents and families and emotional and/or physical abuse at school."¹ Research shows that LGBTQ youths are more likely to run away from home than other youths (Durso and Gates 2012). Like many other homeless youths, LGBTQ youths report abuse, neglect, and family conflict as the reasons for running away from home; rejection based on sexual orientation or gender identity, however, is often at the root of the family conflict (Cochran et al. 2002). LGBTQ youths experiencing homelessness face additional obstacles their straight peers may not face, including insensitivity, prejudice, discrimination, and mistreatment from the crisis response system (e.g., foster parents, social workers, shelter staff) geared toward homeless youths (Durso and Gates 2012). Consequently, LGBTQ youths may be more reluctant to access services than straight youths who are unstably housed, leaving them at higher risk for ending up on the street.

The homeless youth population suffers from high rates of depression, mental health issues, and suicidal ideation.² For LGBTQ homeless youths, however, the cycle of rejection leads to their experiencing worse outcomes. Indeed, when compared with other homeless youths, LGBTQ homeless youths are more likely to experience poor mental health, more likely to exhibit risky sexual behavior and use drugs, more likely to use survival sex and sex trade strategies for coping with their situation, and more likely to be HIV positive.³ LGBTQ homeless youths face two formidable barriers: they must work to overcome their homelessness and simultaneously deal with stigma, discrimination, and mistreatment due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

How many LGBTQ youths are homeless? There are no national numbers, but Youth Count!, a federal interagency initiative that aims to improve counts of unaccompanied homeless youths, provides some data on LGBTQ youths. In 2013, nine communities across the country participated in the initiative by expanding their annual homeless point-in-time efforts to increase coverage of homeless youths. Urban Institute conducted a process study of the initiative to identify promising practices that could be adapted and taken to scale to produce credible and useful data on homeless youths nationwide (Pergamit et al. 2014). The communities involved in Youth Count! independently collected, tabulated, and reported on their data.⁴ These summaries reveal that seven of the nine Youth Count! communities surveyed youths in shelters and on the streets about gender identity and sexual orientation.⁵ Among the six sites for which data are available, 19 percent of youths surveyed identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and 3 percent identified as questioning (figure 1). There was significant variation by site, ranging from 10 percent in Winston-Salem, NC, to 43 percent in New York City. Table 1 provides results by site.

TABLE 1

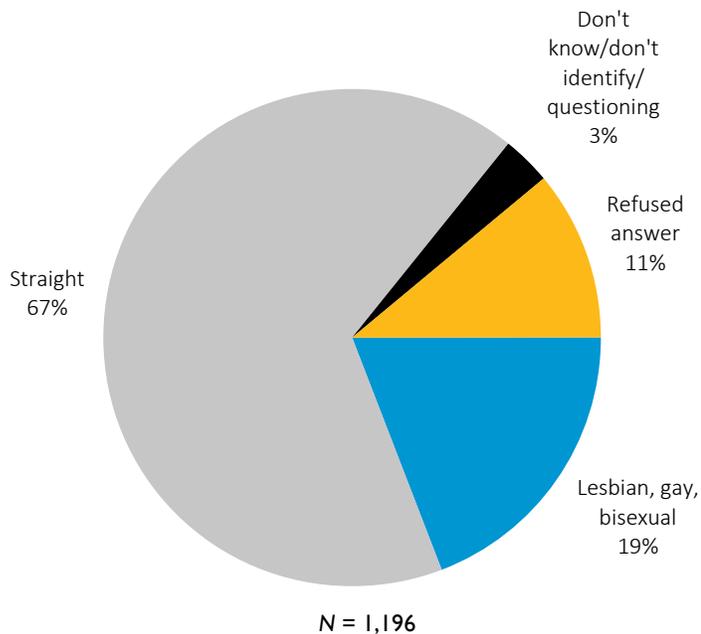
LGB Youths by Youth Count! Site

Site	Share identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual
New York City	43%
King County, WA	19%
Winston Salem, NC	10%
Cuyahoga County (Cleveland), OH	21%
Hennepin County, MN	13%
Houston, TX	18%

Note: Cuyahoga County included "questioning" within its category of lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

FIGURE 1

Sexuality Self-Identification⁶



How to Ensure Better Counts of LGBTQ Homeless Youths

While counting LGBTQ youths was not a core focus of the Youth Count! Initiative, policymakers and practitioners can glean some lessons learned from site experiences. Youth Count! sites used many strategies to improve counts of homeless youths; some of these helped improve outreach to LGBTQ homeless youths in particular, especially those sleeping on the street or other unsafe spaces. Promising practices included partnering with LGBTQ agencies, conducting counts in places that LGBTQ youths frequent, showing signs of support through positive messaging (e.g., rainbows, pink triangles, or “hate-free” and “safe zone” stickers), and involving youths in the count’s design and administration.

By working to improve counts of homeless youths and collecting data on gender identity and sexual orientation Youth Count! has contributed to the knowledge about this under studied and highly vulnerable population. But the communities in Youth Count! represent a tiny share of the hundreds of homeless services providers across the country. Runaway Homeless Youth Management Information Systems, a data system operated by youth shelters, collects data on sexual orientation, but the data quality are low and need improving.⁷ Homeless point-in-time counts across the country and basic data collected in shelters through Homeless Management Information Systems should collect this information as well. We recommend that the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and the US Department of Health and Human Services require communities to count LGBTQ homeless youths in their data systems and during their point-in-time counts. But federal action is not required to make improvements in data collection at the local level. The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2009) recommends that homeless shelters and other youth service providers include questions about sexual orientation and gender identity in the demographics section of intake forms so youths can voluntarily answer these questions.

Getting to Better Policy for LGBTQ Homeless Youths

It’s clear that LGBTQ youths make up a disproportionate share of the homeless population, though we need better data locally and at the national level to know exactly where and how prevalent LGBTQ youth homelessness is and how it varies geographically. More importantly, policymakers would benefit from more research on LGBTQ youth pathways into homelessness and LGBTQ youths’ particular needs, including strengthening their family connections, engaging them in services, and helping them transition to successful adulthood. Ultimately, policymakers need to know what works in ending LGBTQ youth homelessness and how many youths are in need of which services. What share of the LGBTQ homeless youth population can return home with supports and reconnection to family? How many need longer-term support through transitional adult housing programs that offer life skills and employment?

The data available now points toward some specific policy changes for LGBTQ homeless youths—such as improving the crisis response system so that homeless youths have a safe and affirming place to turn to for help. In some communities, policymakers are already moving forward to protect vulnerable homeless youths. The Washington, DC City Council, for example, recently passed legislation requiring a count of LGBTQ youths every five years, special training for staff in homeless shelters and youth services organizations, and dedicated shelter beds for the LGBTQ youth population.⁸ Across the country, crisis response systems—notably shelters and transitional housing—should make some of these changes as well. The National Alliance to End Homelessness offers best practices for serving LGBTQ youths, including extra training for staff in LGBTQ competency; connections to LGBTQ support groups, programs, and services (in house or through referrals); and explicit nondiscrimination and confidentiality policies. There are a handful of service providers across the country with considerable expertise in serving LGBTQ homeless youths—such as Larkin Street in San Francisco, Alli Forney Center in New York City, the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit, and Youth on Fire in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Policymakers have much to learn from these service providers. In addition to strengthening the crisis response system for LGBTQ youths, policymakers also need to identify and fund family prevention and preservation programs to help LGBTQ youths come out and be supported and affirmed by their families. For those situations where this is not possible, identifying independent-living programs that combine housing subsidy and services focused on long term self-sufficiency are important for producing better outcomes for young people.

Notes

1. “LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in Focus: A Conversation with Jeff Kreheley, Director of the LGBT Research and Communications Project at the Center for American Progress, United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, accessed June 26, 2014, http://usich.gov/issue/lgbt_youth/lgbtq_youth_homelessness_in_focus/.
2. See Cochran et al. (2002); Gattis (2012); Moskowitz, Stein, and Lightfoot (2013); and Whitbeck et al. (2004).
3. See Friedman et al. (2009); Gangamma et al. (2008); Lalota et al. (2005); Logan et al. (2013); Moskowitz, Stein, and Lightfoot (2013); Noell and Ochs (2001); Salomonsen-Sautel et al. (2008); Tyler et al. (2003, 2004); and Weiser et al. (2006).
4. Seven sites in the Youth Count! initiative asked about sexual orientation: Boston; Cleveland; Hennepin County, Minnesota; Houston; King County, Washington; New York City; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Data from Boston were not made available for purposes of this brief. Not all sites asked the same question. Some sites asked respondents to identify their sexual orientation and provided a list to choose from. Other sites asked respondents which sexual orientation best “represented them.” Sites varied heavily on whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, questioning, or “don’t know” were separate choices or “gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning” was one answer option. It is important to consider the variance in methodology when interpreting the aggregated survey results.
- 5 Seven sites in the Youth Count! initiative asked about gender identity: Boston; Cleveland; Hennepin County, Minnesota; Houston; King County, Washington; New York City; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Data from Boston were not made available for purposes of this brief. Not all sites asked the same question. Of the sites that asked about gender identity, three sites asked two separate questions about sex (e.g. how a person is born) and gender identity to record those who were transgender; others included “transgender” as a gender option, and did not separate questions about sex and gender; one site posed the questions about gender identity and sexual orientation as an open-ended response. In total, 27 youth identified as transgender in some way. For more information on the limitations of this data, see Pergamit and Cunningham et al. 2014.
6. 1,196 youth in six sites were asked about LGBTQ identification. In total, 1,315 youth were surveyed in eight YouthCount! sites. L.A. County, the ninth YouthCount! site, did not conduct a survey.
7. In FY 2013 in the basic centers (serving under-18s), Pergamit et al. (2014) calculated 6.6 percent identified as LGBTQ. Nearly one in five (19.1%), however, are unknown; either the youth did not report it or the intake workers didn’t ask.
8. John Riley, “DC Council Passes Bill for LGBT Youth,” *Metro Weekly*, February 8, 2014, <http://www.metroweekly.com/2014/02/dc-council-passes-bill-for-lgb/>.

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