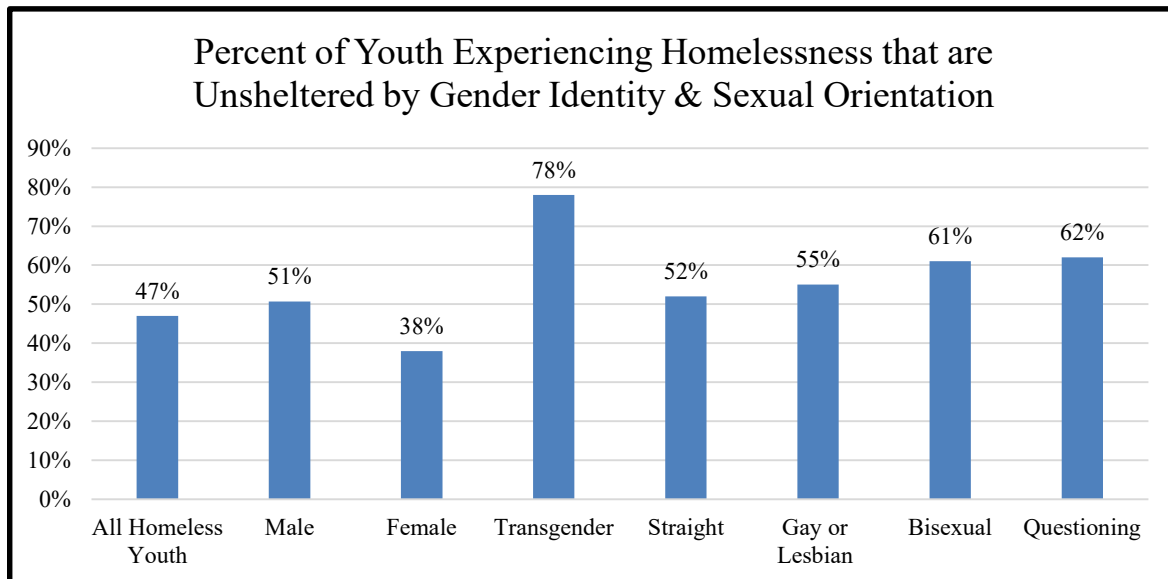




## LGBTQ Youth Experiencing Homelessness

### Background

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) youth are overrepresented in the population experiencing homelessness in the United States. Although exact numbers are hard to find due to uneven disclosure of sexual orientation and gender identity from youth, somewhere between 20 to 40% (300,000 to 600,000) of youth experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ compared to 4 to 10% of the total youth population (Cunningham, 2014; Maccio & Ferguson, 2012). Estimates suggest that LGBTQ youth are anywhere from 2 to 13 times more likely to experience homelessness compared to heterosexual and cisgender youth (Coolhart & Brown, 2017). Studies also find that leaving home due to conflict with guardians over sexual orientation or gender expression is the primary reason for housing instability among LGBTQ youth (Choi et al., 2015). Once they leave home, LGBTQ youth experience higher rates of violence, physical and mental health degradation, and exploitation when compared to other youth experiencing homelessness. Given this disparity, housing researchers, policymakers, and service providers should pay special attention to this sub-group of the population experiencing homelessness in order to effectively combat their distinct outcomes. This literature review documents current research about the scope, underlying causes, and unique characteristics of LGBTQ youth homelessness in Los Angeles.



Source: LAHSA, 2018

### Key Takeaways:

- LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience homelessness than their heterosexual and cisgender peers
- A higher percentage of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles are unsheltered in comparison to heterosexual and cisgender youth experiencing homelessness, illustrating a reluctance by LGBTQ youth to seek shelter, and/or a failure by shelters in providing LGBTQ youth with accessible, safe spaces
- If unsheltered, LGBTQ youth suffer from greater levels of physical and sexual assault, mistreatment by police, and sexual propositioning in comparison to other homeless youth
- Transgender homeless youth specifically exhibit an even greater risk of bullying, family rejection, and sexual abuse
- In attempts to find shelter and support, LGBTQ youth are at greater risk of both discrimination that denies access and exploitation that deters them from otherwise beneficial programs and services



## Literature Review

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### Background and Research Motivation

LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the total youth population experiencing homelessness. According to the LGBTQ Homeless Youth Provider Survey, 20% of youth seeking homeless services identify as gay or lesbian, 7% identify as bisexual, and 2% identify as questioning (Choi et al., 2015). Comparatively, 4% of the total US population identifies as LGBTQ (The Williams Institute, 2019). Five percent of youth experiencing homelessness identified as transgender (Choi et al., 2015) compared to less than 1 percent of the total US population (Flores et al., 2016). LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness are also disproportionately Black. In 2015, 31% of LGBTQ clients identified as Black, compared to only 14% of the total U.S. youth population (Choi et al., 2015; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). The share of youth accessing homeless services have increasingly identified as LGBTQ over the past 10 years, with the share of transgender youth accessing services growing the fastest from 1.5% to 5%. Due to their growing overrepresentation in the population of youth experiencing homelessness, this literature review provides an overview of what we know about the unique causes, challenges, and policy approaches to LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness.

### Unique Causes & Challenges

Service providers report that the most common reason cited for experiencing homelessness by LGBTQ youth is either being kicked out by their parents or running away from home due to family conflict over their sexual orientation or gender identity. 55% of LGBTQ youth cited this cause, while only 17% reported the second highest reason of general family issues. For transgender youth, 67% conveyed that being forced out or running away caused their homelessness, with only 7% reporting general family issues (Choi et al., 2015). This highlights the need for service providers to focus on family counseling and interventions for this group of youth experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, the additional trauma of family conflict and the potential for domestic violence illustrates the distinct vulnerability of this segment of the youth population experiencing homelessness. After being forced from their homes, LGBTQ youth suffer higher rates of depression and mental health problems than their heterosexual and cisgender peers experiencing homelessness who already exhibit higher rates of these conditions when compared to housed youth (Cunningham et al., 2014).

### *Unsheltered*

Once living on the street, LGBTQ youth are at greater risk of physical and sexual abuse from adults and other youth. On average, LGBTQ youth experience seven more acts of sexual violence while experiencing homelessness compared to heterosexual or cisgender youth (Lambda Legal, 2019). Moreover, research shows that one in three LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness have been a victim of a hate crime based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013). Unsheltered LGBTQ youth also face disproportionate targeting and violence from police based on their gender expression, contributing to notably low levels of self-reported trust for authority figures (Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013). This mistrust undermines the likelihood that they actively seek help from shelters and service providers.

LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness are also found to be more likely to take part in risky sexual behavior, use drugs, and be HIV positive in comparison to the overall youth population



experiencing homelessness (Cunningham et al., 2014). Related to this increased risk, they are also statistically more likely to be propositioned in exchange for money, food, shelter, or clothing compared to heterosexual or cisgender youth experiencing homelessness (Lambda Legal, 2019). These factors help to explain the higher rates of sexual abuse, exploitation, and sex trafficking reported by LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness (Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013). The challenges that arise without shelter are particularly alarming considering that a higher percentage of youth experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles that identify as lesbian or gay (55%), bisexual (61%), transgender (78%), or questioning (62%) are unsheltered in comparison to those that identify as heterosexual (52%), cisgender male (51%), or cisgender female (38%) (LAHSA, 2018).

### *Seeking Help*

Given that LGBTQ youth are more likely to be unsheltered than other youth experiencing homelessness, housing providers should consider ways to make housing services accessible, respectful, and safe for LGBTQ youth. When attempting to access housing and other support services, LGBTQ youth often experience discrimination and exploitation by service providers or other youth. Discriminatory practices and policies place barriers between LGBTQ youth and the services they need to establish housing stability (Lambda Legal, 2019). Qualitative interviews inside shelters from providers and LGBTQ youth convey that shelter gender segregation and being assigned the wrong gender category creates significant emotional distress for LGBTQ youth (Coolhart & Brown, 2017). Further, LGBTQ youth report consistent discrimination from shelter staff based on religious beliefs, undermining their sense of security and acceptance already unsettled by unique family issues (Coolhart & Brown, 2017).

Tensions or conflicts with other shelter residents also magnify the challenges faced by LGBTQ youth looking for housing assistance. Many LGBTQ youth report developing depression and stigma due to other shelter residents refusing to share rooms with them (Coolhart & Brown, 2017). These feelings deter LGBTQ youth from seeking help at shelters, creating a barrier to the services and assistance they need to prevent them from becoming chronically homeless or getting involved in the criminal justice system. Physical assault from peers while attempting to access help deters them from sticking with the programs and services they need to establish residential stability and positive development mentally and socially (Lambda Legal, 2019). Moreover, LGBTQ youth reported experiencing excessive violence in the form of harassment, physical injury, and theft, especially in adult shelters that LGBTQ youth are often forced to due to discrimination at youth shelters (Coolhart & Brown, 2017).

### *Transgender Youth*

In addition to the challenges shared by all LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, transgender youth exhibit even more disparate outcomes. Surveys find that transgender youth experiencing homelessness experience higher rates of bullying, family rejection, and physical or sexual abuse in comparison to other LGBTQ youth (Choi et al., 2015). This discrimination spills over into the employment and housing sector. A 2015 needs assessment of transgender people found that those without a Bachelor's degree were five times more likely to be unemployed compared to cisgender people (Edelman et al., 2015). The same assessment found that more than 40% of respondents reported being denied a job based on the interviewer's perception of their trans identity (Edelman et al., 2015). These barriers to employment are also found when transgender people seek housing, as 25% of survey respondents reporting being denied housing based on their gender expression, with



transgender women twice as likely as transgender men to be denied (Edelman et al., 2015). These barriers to work and housing stability help to explain the overrepresentation of transgender youth in the population of those experiencing homelessness.

Once sheltered, transgender youth continue to face discrimination and unique challenges. Most shelters are segregated by sex, meaning that facilities either only serve men or women, or if they do serve both they have distinct living quarters separating men and women. Placement here usually depends on the service providers' assumptions about an individual's sex during intake. This means that transgender youth face extreme difficulty in being adequately and safely sheltered based on their personal gender identification (Mottet & Ohle, 2006). Not only do transgender youth experience the emotional harm of being misclassified by shelter staff and other youth, but often residences are physically unsafe for them (Mottet & Ohle, 2006). For instance, transgender girls report verbal, physical, and sexual harassment when shelters force them to room with boys (Mottet & Ohle, 2006). Even when properly classified, many shelters fail to provide adequate privacy for transgender youth, exemplified by transgender boys being forced to shower in the open with cisgender boys, leaving them extremely vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault (Mottet & Ohle, 2006). The problems that transgender youth encounter at shelters could help to explain why 78% of transgender youth experiencing homelessness are unsheltered compared to only 45% of cisgender youth. (LAHSA, 2018).

### **Policy Recommendations**

These challenges demand that service providers design programs in an inclusive and culturally sensitive manner that tailor services to the needs of LGBTQ youth. Service providers should operate under the assumption that some of their clients are LGBTQ even if they do not disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many providers report that they believe that they do not need to focus on LGBTQ youth specifically (Choi et al., 2015). Even if they did acknowledge the need to tailor programs to their needs, agencies reported that they needed additional help to best support LGBTQ youth (Choi et al., 2015). In stark contrast, LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness overwhelmingly desire services tailored specifically to the LGBTQ community (Wells et al., 2013). A 2015 survey of homeless service agencies and their staff highlights gaps in homelessness services provided to LGBTQ youth (Maccio & Ferguson, 2015). The survey describes key shortcomings and recommendations for improvement in the following areas: housing, education, employment, family, cultural competency, and inclusivity.

#### *Housing Services*

Discrimination, harassment, and violence in shelters contribute to LGBTQ youth remaining on the street. These challenges necessitate the integration of LGBTQ specific training and procedures as well as more crisis beds in shelters offering LGBTQ specific services. Expanding permanent supportive housing opportunities through residences that cater solely to LGBTQ youth could also improve housing stability for LGBTQ youth. Currently, there are no permanent supportive housing programs like this, but the Los Angeles LGBT Center does offer a transitional housing program to LGBTQ youth (Los Angeles LGBT Center, 2019). This program provides a model for designing more LGBTQ specific housing options that can avoid some of the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ youth in conventional housing programs. Another organization, Point Source Youth, helps service organizations develop rapid re-housing and host home interventions for youth experiencing homelessness in general but prioritizes LGBTQ youth and youth of color (Point Source Youth,



2018). Lastly, additional after-housing services for older LGBTQ youth who age out of foster care could provide the additional support they need in their transition to adulthood (Maccio & Ferguson, 2015).

### *Education Services*

Family trauma means that most LGBTQ youth experience severe disruption of their formal education and early academic development. As such, housing programs should incorporate educational programming into existing services to ensure LGBTQ youth can avoid falling behind their peers. This could include General Education Development (GED) tutoring, college preparation and application help, and outreach to universities to advocate that they keep dormitories and dining facilities open during holidays for LGBTQ youth who cannot return home. Also, LGBTQ youth agree that sex education tailored to LGBTQ issues is one of their highest ranked areas of need (Wells et al., 2016). Providing this education is especially important given the disproportionately higher rates of survival sex, risky sexual behavior, and sexually transmitted infections for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness (Rice et al., 2013; Whitbeck et al., 2004).

### *Employment Services*

LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness experience significant difficulty in securing stable employment due to discrimination, juvenile records, and housing instability (Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013). Lack of stable income forces LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness into underground economies that put them at even greater risk of sexually transmitted infections, criminal justice involvement, and continued instability (Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013). Despite these increased challenges in traditional labor markets, research shows a dearth of employment services, career centers, and mentoring opportunities for LGBTQ youth (Maccio & Ferguson, 2015). Service providers should better integrate job training and career services to ensure LGBTQ youth have the stability of a living wage necessary to avoid other negative outcomes.

### *Family Counseling Services*

Since LGBTQ youth are more likely to leave home due to family conflict over their sexual orientation and/or gender expression, agencies need to broaden their focus to include programming that encourages self-reflection from parents and caregivers in an effort to reunify families (Quintana & Krehely, 2010).

### *Cultural Competency Training*

Evidence of shelter staff disrespect, discrimination, and abuse illustrate the need for agencies to implement formalized, cultural competency training specific to LGBTQ issues. Nearly 37% of shelter service staff surveyed in 2015 cited the qualities and characteristics of staff as a reason they were able to successfully provide services to LGBTQ youth (Choi et al., 2015). This could include a staff culture that promotes LGBTQ inclusiveness, staff competencies and professional training, and employing staff who identify as LGBTQ. Thus, staff at homeless shelters and service agencies should undergo sensitivity training on gender identification, LGBTQ youth needs and concerns, social and emotional counseling of LGBTQ issues, and how to cultivate safe, respectful, and productive spaces for LGBTQ youth (Tierney & Ward, 2017).



*Inclusivity*

Almost a quarter of all youth service agencies surveyed in 2015 revealed that they did not have a dedicated LGBTQ staff member and they believed they did not need to hire one (Choi et al., 2015). However, including individuals with lived homeless experience who identify as LGBTQ in the policymaking and implementation process helps to ensure that the specific needs of this group are properly understood and subsequently fulfilled (Tierney & Ward, 2017). As such, agencies should actively hire LGBTQ candidates to guide their LGBTQ tailored policies and programming.

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