



Nowhere to Go

Issue Brief on Gay and Transgender Youth Homelessness

David Wagner August 2010

Introduction

It's no secret that our nation has an endemic homelessness problem, and many are aware that youth make up a large percentage of homeless Americans. But the fact that a disproportionately large portion of homeless youth comes from the gay* and transgender community is not widely known.

These young Americans face far harsher conditions on the streets than their heterosexual peers, and there are very few government programs or charity groups offering the safety nets they need to prevent them from slipping into permanent homelessness. The federal government is largely inactive when it comes to gay and transgender youth homelessness, often turning a blind eye to the discrimination and hostility these youth face in schools, the foster-care system, and federally funded shelters.

Focusing on homeless shelters provides keen insight into the lacking resources and antagonism homeless gay and transgender youth routinely face. Most gay and transgender youth face staff in shelters who either don't how or refuse to accommodate their needs. This is especially true of many faith-based shelters that receive a substantial chunk of federal allocations to combat youth homelessness—\$2.2 billion in competitive social service grants went to faith-based organizations in Fiscal Year 2005.

There are effective shelters that are designed to help gay and transgender youth, among them the Ali Forney Center in New York City, the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit, and CHRIS Kids TransitionZ in Atlanta, which we will examine in this issue brief. But unfortunately the kinds of shelters that understand gay and

* In this issue brief, the word gay is used as an umbrella term to refer to all youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer.

transgender youth are few and far between. For our government to adequately serve these homeless children, teenagers, and young adults, it must outlaw discrimination in federally funded shelters, fully fund shelters that work for gay and transgender youth, and conduct further research into this crucial issue. When reauthorizing the Runaway Homeless Youth Act, Congress should amend legislation with provisions and spending that specifically account for the needs of homeless gay and transgender youth. In the pages that follow, we'll detail the numbers behind this growing problem in our country and what our government can and should do about it.

The plight of gay and transgender homeless youth

Data on homeless youth reveal two alarming facts. The first is gay and transgender youth make up a staggering percentage of overall homeless youth given their percentage in the overall youth population. The second is gay and transgender youth who become homeless face a much more dire and harsh existence on the streets than straight homeless youth.

While gay and transgender youth comprise only about 5 percent to 10 percent of the total youth population, they make up at least 20 percent, and by some estimates as much as 40 percent of the homeless youth population, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness. This means that of the 1.6 million American youth that experience homelessness every year, anywhere from 320,000 to 640,000 are gay or transgender.

The streets are certainly cruel to all homeless youth, but the litany of problems, challenges, and afflictions homelessness brings is aggravated for homeless gay and transgender youth. While a staggering 33 percent of straight homeless youth have been sexually assaulted, an even more astounding 58 percent of homeless gay and transgender youth have experienced sexual assault.² Forty-four percent of gay and transgender youth experience sexual abuse at the hands of their adult caretakers, while only 22 percent of straight youth have similar encounters.³

Other social ills also plague gay and transgender youth more compared to their straight counterparts. Forty-two percent of homeless gay and transgender youth abuse alcohol, compared with 27 percent of straight homeless youth, according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Research conducted by Dr. Caitlin Ryan and her team from the Family Acceptance Project shows that gay young

adults who were highly rejected by their families during adolescence because of their gay identity were 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide, 5.9 times more likely to experience depression, 3.4 times more likely to use illicit drugs, and 3.4 times more likely to have unprotected sex—compared with their gay peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection related to their identity.⁴

Why are there so many more gay and transgender youth now on the streets? Well, their pathways often involve severe family conflict over coming out at a young age, unsafe and indifferent school environments, a foster care system that doesn't know how or isn't willing to meet the needs of gay and transgender youth, and inaccessibility of discriminatory homeless shelters. Let's look at each of these in turn—for they bear directly on the kinds of homeless shelters these youth need to survive homelessness and become productive members of our society.

Coming out early

Over-representation of gay and transgender youth among homeless youth is the product of many factors, but a surprising amount is directly related to the moment when they came out to their family. Gay and transgender youth are coming out much earlier than they did in the past. Research from the Family Acceptance Project also shows that young people self-identify as gay as young as five and seven years old, and they are self-identifying as gay at an average age of 13.4 years.⁵

This shift toward coming out earlier in life indicates significant progress in accepting gay and transgender Americans into our culture and society, but unfortunate consequences sometimes arise from coming out so young. The younger children come out, the more vulnerable they are to their families' rejection. In the 1970s and 1980s, gay and transgender individuals typically came out later in life, by which time they likely had stable jobs, adequate shelter, and financial independence—safeguards that would prevent them from becoming homeless in case their family rejected them due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Today when families become embroiled in severe conflict over their children's sexual orientation or gender identity, the home can turn into an unsafe or unwelcoming environment, with gay and transgender youth increasingly pushed out on to the streets with no viable means of supporting themselves. The increasingly younger age of coming out can in part account for the harrowing reality that in New York City, the average age for becoming homeless for lesbians and gays is 14.4 years old, and 13.5 years for transgender youth.⁶

Hostility and indifference in school

Schools, which are supposed to provide a safe environment for children and teens to spend most of their day furthering their education, are also pushing gay and transgender youth closer to a life on the streets. Too often schools are a haven for institutionalized prejudice, administrative indifference, verbal abuse, and outright violence toward gay and transgender students.

Eighty-six percent of gay and transgender youth report being verbally harassed at school, 44 percent say they've been physically harassed, and 22 percent have been physically assaulted, all because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. And of the gay and transgender youth who brought complaints about such incidents to school administrators, 31 percent got no response.⁷

Due to these alienating and antagonistic factors, gay and transgender youth are two times less likely to pursue college or finish high school than their straight peers, according to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network.⁸ This poses tragic consequences not just for these youth but also for our society.

The foster care system pushes gay and transgender youth onto the streets

The foster care system, charged with providing a safe alternative for children who can no longer live in their original family's home, also has systemic flaws that contribute to the high incidence of homelessness among gay and transgender youth. Foster parents and child welfare workers are often not educated about how to properly care these youth, and some are simply hostile toward them.

Studies show that 78 percent of gay and transgender youth placed in foster care are removed or run away from their foster homes due to conflict over their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁹ Seventy percent of gay and transgender children are victims of violence within the foster care system.¹⁰ More than half said they felt safer on the streets than in their foster or group homes.¹¹

Lack of shelter for homeless gay and transgender youth

Finding no solace in their families' homes, schools, or in the child welfare system, gay and transgender youth often turn to homeless shelters as a last ditch effort

to staying off the streets. Many of these shelters, however—especially the ones run by faith-based organizations—are not prepared to serve, or simply refuse to accommodate, gay and transgender youth.

Too often gay and transgender children and teens are confronted with inadequate services, homophobia, and unwelcoming environments. Shelters across the board are underfunded and unable to keep up with the demand of the general homeless youth population, let alone the special needs and conditions required by gay and transgender youth. And the few shelters that are effectively addressing their needs make only a small impact, considering how scarce and far between they are.

A gap in federal funding

Clearly, more resources are needed to cope with this rapidly escalating crisis in our society, yet the federal government currently spends very little to tackle the overwhelming problem of youth homelessness—and practically nothing to deal with the consequences of gay and transgender youth homelessness. Of the federal budget's \$4.2 billion allocation to homelessness assistance, only \$195 million is being directed toward homeless youth. None of these funds are being directed specifically toward gay and transgender youth.

The main piece of legislation concerning youth homelessness is the Runaway Homeless Youth Act, which was first passed in 1974 and last reauthorized in 2003 and attempts to alleviate youth homelessness through government programs that provide basic shelter, initiate street outreach, and assist with transitional living. None of these programs are currently designed to address the specific needs of homeless gay and transgender youth.

The Bush administration shifted focus in regard to the types of social programs the federal government funds in 2005 by providing an unprecedented \$2.2 billion in competitive social service grants to faith-based organizations to help tackle homelessness in our country. While religious organizations may often do a lot of charitable good, and while some may be accepting of gay and transgender youth, far too many faith-based shelters espouse homophobic beliefs and enforce antigay policies—practices that are now federally subsidized.

But religious organizations aren't the only offenders when it comes to mistreating gay and transgender homeless youth. Some nonreligious shelters are much worse

than a number of faith-based shelters in dealing with this population's needs. The bottom line is that discrimination toward gay and transgender youth is rampant in far too many shelters, both faith based and secular. These shelters are granted federal funding with no regard for how well equipped or trained they are to deal positively with gay and transgender homeless youth.

Some shelters turn away gay and transgender children, teens, and young adults outright. Others discourage gay and transgender youth from adhering to their sexual orientation or gender identity, often putting gay and transgender shelter-seekers through conversion therapies designed to turn them straight. Sometimes gay and transgender youth are required to wear clothing of different colors than the clothes their straight peers have to wear, singling them out in shelters. Many gay and transgender youth report shelter staff standing by idly while others in the shelter physically attacked them.

Shelters run by religious organizations are more likely to be staffed by unpaid volunteers drawn from the church's congregation than trained social workers. The volunteer to professional ratio at secular shelters is 3 to 1; at faith-based shelters, it's as high as 15 to 1.¹² These volunteers often consider complying with and promoting church teachings more important than serving gay and transgender youth's specific needs in an unbiased, professional manner without proselytizing.

Discrimination in these settings is heightened for transgender youth. Most homeless shelters are segregated by sex, and many homeless shelter workers don't know how to accommodate transgender persons, or are insensitive to their particular needs. Transgender youth are forced to sleep in quarters based on their birth sex, not on their gender identity or outward expression. In many instances this leads to unwanted sexual advances and assault. Some shelters even go so far as to require transgender people to have undergone sex reassignment surgery before even granting them admittance into the shelter.¹³

Of course, not all homeless shelters, faith based or not, discriminate against gay and transgender youth. Many of them provide valuable social services to their communities. But the fact remains that federal funding and oversight currently tolerates discriminatory and antagonistic practices in homeless shelters. Nothing is done to ensure that gay and transgender youth are guaranteed the same access and safety in shelters as their straight peers.

Not enough beds

The demand for shelters that adequately address the specific needs of homeless gay and transgender youth far exceeds the scant number of shelters that provide such services. Looking at San Francisco's homeless gay and transgender youth in conjunction with its shelter offerings sheds light on this problem. Approximately 5,658 youth are homeless in this city, according to Larkin Street Youth Services.¹⁴ Since we know that 20 percent to 40 percent of homeless youth identify as gay or transgender, we can assume that anywhere from 1,132 to 2,263 gay and transgender youth are living on the streets in San Francisco. Yet according to *El Tecolote*, a local newspaper, "no shelters exist in San Francisco that offer services targeted to LGBT clients."¹⁵

This dearth of beds for gay and transgender youth in San Francisco is a phenomenon replicated in cities across the United States. *The New York Times* reports that, "In New York City, there are no more than 50 beds for gay homeless youth."¹⁶ Many major cities across the United States have no beds at all specifically reserved for homeless gay and transgender youth.

Beds in safe, nondiscriminatory homeless shelters are in high demand and short supply for all homeless youth, but for gay and transgender youth this shortage runs even deeper. Shelters, the final safety net for those in danger of becoming homeless, are letting far too many gay and transgender youth slip through the cracks and end up on the streets. But there are important exceptions.

Shelters that work for gay and transgender youth

Shelters that offer temporary housing, transitional living programs, and lasting support to gay and transgender youth do exist, though they currently make up only a fraction of existing social service organizations. Among them are the Ali Forney Center in New York City, the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit, and CHRIS Kids' TransitionZ program in Atlanta. All of them are helping keep gay and transgender children and young adults off the streets, and on track for achieving stable and fulfilling lives. Let's briefly look at each of their operations.

Ali Forney Center—New York City

Named after a gay activist and homeless youth who was murdered on the streets of Manhattan in 1997, the Ali Forney Center provides shelter to gay and transgender youth ages 16 to 24. With shelter sites scattered throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn, the center provides 30 beds for emergency housing. On top of that, its transitional living program serves 20 gay and transgender youth, who are provided housing for up to two years while receiving career and education counseling.¹⁷

The center also runs a day center in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, a haven for the gay and transgender community, including runaway youth. Here, the Ali Forney Center engages in street outreach programs and provide case management, medical care, HIV testing, mental health assessment and treatment, showers, food, employment assistance, and housing referrals.

Founded in the summer of 2002 by Carl Siciliano, a former monk of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert who has worked with homeless youth in New York City since 1994, the Ali Forney Center provides a nurturing environment that helps gay and transgender youth work toward a stable, rewarding life.

One case in point: Rebecca Walton, a transgender youth, found shelter at the Ali Forney Center after being abused at Covenant House (a faith-based organization with a record of discrimination against gay and transgender shelter-seekers) and spending time in Rikers Island jail for engaging in sex work in order to survive. While staying in a transitional living apartment run by the Ali Forney Center, Walton was able to enroll in a nine-month medical assistant certificate program at the Sanford-Brown Institute, which put her on the path to a well-paying job and an end to homelessness. “Here, I can have a somewhat normal life,” Walton told *The Villager* newspaper. “It feels like home.”¹⁸

As the largest and most comprehensive program of its kind, the Ali Forney Center is a shining example of how tailoring shelters to meet the unique needs of gay and transgender youth can prevent this otherwise rejected population from ending up without any alternatives to homelessness. Despite all the help the Ali Forney Center is doing, Siciliano says, “over 150 LGBT youth are on a waiting list to access the Ali Forney Center’s 58 beds.”¹⁹

Ruth Ellis Center—Detroit

Another model for how best to serve homeless gay and transgender youth can be found in Detroit at the Ruth Ellis Center. This organization began in 1999 with a street outreach program. Its drop-in center, Second Stories, provides food, showers, crisis intervention, support groups, and a safe recreational space to homeless gay and transgender youth.

The center provides housing as well. Its Semi-Independent Living Program serves gay and transgender youth ages 12 to 17. The Transitional Living Program serves youth ages 16 to 21 for up to 18 months. The center helps residents advance their education and provides gay and transgender youth with valuable career training and job placement services. Mental and physical health care comes with residency, and the nonjudgmental, supportive environment created by the center nurtures gay and transgender youth's self-esteem.²⁰

Residents such as Sarah Strickland find solace they can't get anywhere else in the LGBT-friendly environment fostered by Ruth House. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Strickland said, "The center is the only place where I feel safe being me ... Out there, I knew I wasn't safe. I knew I might be killed by someone realizing that I'm a girl looking like a boy."²¹

The Ruth Ellis Center helps residents like Strickland attain higher levels of education and train for a job that will pay a decent salary. The center is the only shelter and transitional living program for LGBT youth in the entire Midwest.²²

CHRIS Kids TransitionZ—Atlanta

CHRIS Kids is a nonprofit organization in Atlanta that aims to improve child welfare and prevent youth homelessness. In trying to fulfill this mission, it has initiated many programs, one of them being TransitionZ, which aims to keep gay and transgender youth in danger of becoming homeless off the streets.

TransitionZ houses gay and transgender youth ages 17 to 24 in apartments throughout Atlanta, providing them with educational and vocational training, life-skills development, and counseling. Residents are required to work or go to school at least 20 hours a week, and staff works individually with residents to make sure that they are on track for making a smooth transition into a stable life outside the program.²³

For many residents, the program is a life saver. Jamal, now 21–years-old, was kicked out of his family’s home after revealing that he was gay in junior high. After living in a friend’s car for a period of time, he found CHRIS Kids. “I nearly dropped out of high school until I was referred to CHRIS Kids,” he now says. “They took me in and gave me a judgment free zone where I felt safe. They encouraged me to pursue my education and supported me. CHRIS Kids built my confidence, accepted me unconditionally and gave me all the support I needed to be successful.”²⁴

Jamal is now enrolled at Georgia Perimeter College, on track for a stable career and a fulfilling life off the streets.

Recommendations

Making sure that gay and transgender youth avoid homelessness will be no easy task, but there are many common-sense measures not currently in place that, if adopted, will greatly help reduce the huge numbers of homeless gay and transgender youth. If we outlaw discrimination in federally subsidized shelters, invest more heavily in shelters that are specifically designed to serve gay and transgender youth, and conduct more research and data collection on this key segment of the homeless youth population, we can help keep gay and transgender youth off the streets, and on the road to a better life.

Outlaw discrimination in federally funded shelters

Federal funding is currently being awarded to shelters without any requirement that they not discriminate against homeless gay and transgender youth. This lapse in protection of such a vulnerable community translates into shelters that are unfriendly, and sometimes downright hostile, toward gay and transgender youth.

Obviously, religious groups are free to believe whatever they want. But any organization—religious or not—that treats homeless gay and transgender youth differently than straight homeless youth should not receive any taxpayer dollars. The Runaway Homeless Youth Act, last renewed in 2003, should be amended to require federally funded homeless shelters to accommodate the needs of gay and transgender youth without discrimination. The National Center for Transgender Equality has suggested that a certification process should also be initiated so that homeless shelters that competently cater to LGBT needs can advertise this fact and so that gay and transgender youth in search of such shelters can easily find them.²⁵

In order to receive federal subsidies and pass such a certification process, homeless shelters should be required to adopt such measures as:

- Treating gay and transgender youth with respect and ensuring their safety
- Affirming gay and transgender youth's identities rather than challenging or trying to alter them
- Facilitating access to supportive education, medical care, and mental health care
- Connecting youth with local LGBT programs, resources, and services designed specifically for the LGBT community
- Adopting written nondiscrimination plans
- Educating employees about who gay and transgender youth are and what they need from a homeless shelter

“National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth,” a document created by a coalition of LGBT advocacy and children's rights organizations, presents a compendium of such recommendations for what homeless shelters can do to best serve gay and transgender youth.²⁶

Fully fund shelters designed for gay and transgender youth

When reauthorizing the Runaway Homeless Youth Act, Congress should consider increasing the current \$195 million allocation for homeless youth, as well as setting aside a portion of this funding that would go directly toward tackling the issue of LGBT youth homelessness. Federal funding should be redirected toward these operations and away from shelters that foster discriminatory, LGBT-unfriendly environments.

Considering how high the demand for safe LGBT homeless shelters is, organizations that foster nurturing environments for homeless gay and transgender youth should be given funding to both sustain and then expand their operations. Devoting more funding toward keeping homeless youth off the streets is money well spent, considering that it costs almost 10 times more to maintain a youth in the criminal justice system for one year (\$53,665) than it does to permanently get a homeless youth off the street and prevent them from entering the criminal justice system (\$5,887).²⁷

Conduct more research and collect more data on gay and transgender youth homelessness

Though we now have estimates of the size of the gay and transgender youth homeless population and cursory insight into this problem's genesis, we need more and better information. We know that gay and transgender youth are highly overrepresented in the homeless youth population, but we don't know exactly to what extent. We may know about the various pathways that lead gay and transgender youth to homelessness, but we don't have enough hard data about how these pathways vary based on a youth's exact age or race, or whether they live in a city or more rural areas.

All federal programs serving homeless youth should be required to track information about the gay and transgender youth they come in contact with. The Obama administration should call for and Congress should fund research into why gay and transgender youth become homeless, why their families reject them, why schools and the foster care system are failing them, what is barring them from education and the workforce, and why so many gay and transgender children end up in the juvenile justice system.

The Departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Education, and Labor, as well as the Census Bureau, should be involved in crafting and executing this research. Only by collecting more thorough information on this large segment of the homeless youth population will we be able to fully understand how to keep gay and transgender youth off the streets.

Conclusion

Getting serious about ending youth homelessness means responding to the overwhelming crisis of LGBT youth homelessness. Gay and transgender youth comprise a startling portion of the total number of homeless youth, given that they only make up 5 percent to 10 percent of youth at large. After being rejected by their families due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, their journey to eventual homelessness is a series of failures on the part of deaf government institutions, indifferent agencies, and discriminatory social services. The cracks in the system that fail to catch gay and transgender youth on their downward fall toward homelessness can be remedied if we pay attention to this heretofore-marginalized group.

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Endnotes

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