



Seeking Shelter

The Experiences and Unmet Needs of LGBT Homeless Youth

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Introduction and summary

In 2010, the Center for American Progress issued a landmark report on homelessness among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, youth. “On the Streets: The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth” explored the drivers of homelessness among LGBT youth, the experiences they have on the street, and proposed federal interventions that could help address the epidemic of homelessness among LGBT children and young adults. Our goal here is to update that report, so we began with the same assumption as the original authors three years ago: Every child deserves a supportive and loving home. Unfortunately, our findings indicate that this is still not the reality for too many LGBT youth across the United States.

Over the past several years, there has been an increase in robust data collection from cities in all corners of the United States on the experiences of homeless youth, and many of these surveys and studies have observed and described the disparities experienced by LGBT youth in shelters and on the streets. There are also new service providers who have stepped up to serve vulnerable LGBT youth and help make their lives healthier, happier, and more stable. And more LGBT young people and adults who experienced homelessness as youth have come forward with bravery and candor to tell their stories. These new developments are encouraging, and help paint a more detailed picture of who LGBT homeless youth are and how they ended up out of their homes and separated from their families.

But LGBT youth continue to be disproportionately represented among homeless youth in our country, and their experiences of homelessness continue to be characterized by violence, discrimination, poor health, and unmet needs. Family rejection, harassment in schools, and the shortcomings of juvenile justice and child welfare continue to drive these elevated rates of homelessness. And all the while, federal funding for essential services to the well-being of these youth has remained stagnant. There is much more work to be done.

In this report, we once again explore who LGBT homeless youth are, how they become homeless, how their needs are being addressed, and what the federal government can do to eliminate homelessness among LGBT youth. In particular, we stress the following policy priorities that can assist in preventing homelessness among LGBT youth and change their lives for the better:

- Reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act with LGBT-specific provisions.
- Establish standards that protect LGBT youth from bullying and harassment in schools.
- Support initiatives that strengthen families with LGBT children, and that promote acceptance and understanding between parents and children.
- Disassemble the school-to-prison pipeline.
- Initiate efforts to research LGBT youth homelessness and track demographic data on homeless youth that includes sexual orientation and gender identity.

These five policy recommendations would bolster the efforts of service providers around the country, creating a comprehensive framework to address the challenges in building effective homeless-service programs. No policy, program, or study will eliminate LGBT youth homelessness today, in a month, or even in a year. But developing a cohesive federal approach to this pressing issue is a necessary step toward giving all youth safe homes and brighter futures.

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