



Beyond 4 Walls and a Roof

Addressing Homelessness Among Transgender Youth

By Hannah Hussey February 2015

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

The number of unaccompanied homeless youth in the United States is alarming, with some experts comparing it to an epidemic. Studies indicate that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, youth comprise a disproportionate percentage of these young people—approximately 40 percent.¹ In some regions, 25 percent to 37 percent of LGBT high school students are or have recently been homeless.² Unfortunately, little research considers the unique experiences of transgender youth, a group that includes minors as well as young people in their late teens and 20s.

The information that is available indicates that transgender individuals experience a range of health and wellness disparities compared with their cisgender peers. Family rejection; inadequate social services; and discrimination in housing, employment, and education make it difficult for transgender young people to secure a safe and affirming place to live. Once homeless, transgender youth too often find that shelters are unwelcoming or unavailable, health care is inaccessible, and law enforcement systems are unhelpful.

As more youth transition at earlier ages, they become both more visible and more susceptible to family rejection and societal discrimination. Surveys suggest that increasing numbers of transgender youth are homeless—or at least that a larger share are outing themselves to service providers. For instance, one study of service providers working with LGBT homeless youth found that more than three-quarters reported having worked with transgender clients in the previous year—a significant increase over 10 years before, when fewer than half reported serving homeless transgender clients.³ Immediate attention to these young people is vital to improve their health and safety.

This report compiles existing research in order to provide an overview of the demographics of transgender homeless youth, their experiences while homeless, and the factors that contribute to homelessness and housing instability among this community. It also outlines a series of recommendations for federal, state, and local policymakers to meet the housing needs of transgender young people and to improve outcomes for those experiencing homelessness. In particular, this report focuses on the following mechanisms for preventing and ending homelessness:

- Providing the resources needed for homeless and at-risk transgender youth to stabilize their lives, including shelters and transitional living programs, skill-building opportunities, health promotion programs, and family intervention services
- Implementing strong nondiscrimination policies and eliminating barriers to services in shelters, health care, vital records, and law enforcement
- Addressing the root causes of homelessness through changes to the interlocking systems that hold transgender youth back from reaching their full potential, including housing, employment, education, public accommodations, juvenile justice, and foster care
- Expanding data-collection efforts to include gender identity in respectful and confidential ways

In the face of adversity, many homeless transgender youth are demonstrating tremendous resilience by building tight-knit peer support networks, leading community organizing and advocacy efforts, and simply surviving despite the odds against them. As they seek to pursue their passions, these young people need targeted support and policy interventions in order to achieve positive social, economic, and health outcomes as they navigate and contribute to the world around them. While the drivers of youth homelessness are complex and solutions will take time, no commitment to seeing all youth safely housed will be complete until policymakers, service providers, researchers, and advocates join transgender young people in celebrating who they are and who they could grow to be.

Key terms⁴

The following terms are defined as used in this report. See the endnotes for further information and additional meanings.

Cisgender: A term that describes a person whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.

Gender identity: An individual's internal view of their own gender, an inner sense that could include being a man, a woman, both, neither, or something else entirely.

Gender expression: The manner in which a person represents or expresses gender to others, often through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, activities, voice, and mannerisms.

Gender nonconforming: A broad description that may include people whose gender expression or gender identity is neither masculine nor feminine or is different from traditional or stereotypical gender expectations. Some individuals prefer the terms gender variant or gender expansive. Gender-nonconforming youth may or may not identify as transgender or as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Genderqueer: An umbrella term that includes people whose gender identities or expressions may be neither male nor female, between or beyond genders, or some combination of genders.

Experiences of homeless transgender young people

While anecdotes about the disparities faced by homeless transgender youth are abundant, limited data make it difficult to provide a comprehensive overview of the extent of homelessness among transgender youth. Nevertheless, existing research can offer a glimpse at lifetime rates of homelessness. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey, conducted in 2008 and 2009, found that 22 percent of respondents ages 18 to 24 had been homeless at some point in their lives in connection with their gender identity or expression.⁵ Rates are likely higher among at-risk communities. One study of HIV risk and sex work among transgender women ages 15 to 24 found that 43 percent had a history of homelessness,⁶ while another study of HIV risk among transgender women of color ages 16 to 25 found that 18 percent of respondents were currently homeless, and 46 percent reported having difficulty finding a safe place to sleep at night.⁷

Similarly, estimates of the percentage of homeless youth who are transgender are few and varied, but available information suggests that it is significantly higher than the number of transgender individuals in the general population—generally thought to be less than 1 percent, though it may be slightly greater among youth.⁸ Reports from several of the cities that participated in the 2013 Youth Count! initiative are illuminating: The percentage of homeless youth who were transgender was measured as 2 percent in Seattle, 3 percent in Cleveland, 6 percent in New York City, and 7 percent in Houston.⁹ Methodologies used at some of the Youth Count! sites likely undercounted transgender youth and, in some instances, did not include all youth experiencing homelessness, so it is possible that the actual numbers of transgender youth in these locations are even higher. Indeed, a report by the Family and Youth Services Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families found that 6.8 percent of street youth interviewed by the agency identified as transgender.¹⁰

These studies are not inclusive of all transgender youth, and some rely on small samples or new research approaches, so their results may not be conclusive. Comparisons across geographic locations and demographic groups are likewise difficult to make, given significant variations in research methodologies. Nonetheless, the broad trends suggested by these preliminary data are staggering. Additional work to refine methods for studying homelessness and gender identity among youth, as well as further research into potential geographic and demographic disparities, is critical to obtain a clearer, more nuanced understanding of homeless transgender communities.

Bentley Burdick¹¹

Youth advocate, 18 years old

My experiences with being homeless have been a mixed bag of endings and beginnings. I became classified by my school as homeless three years ago, after experiencing housing instability and family disruption. In the past year, I have stabilized and am no longer homeless. During that time, I was lucky enough to have an older sister willing to watch out for me, so my direct experience with shelters was limited. Only one youth program existed in my town that I knew of at the time: the Tumbleweed Runaway Program. I went through the Tumbleweed Program for things such as clothes, food, the occasional holiday money, and bus passes so I could transport myself within the limited range of our city's public transit system. Tumbleweed was an extremely supportive program for LGBT youth. They never questioned my identity. It seems like a small thing to not be constantly asked "Are you certain?" or to not be told that there are dangers behind "choosing" to be transgender, but it has a big impact. Living in Montana, most other programs, whether for youth or adults, are not so supportive.

In a funny turn of events, I'm now actually employed at the same organization that helped me out so much, working directly with youth who are experiencing some of the things I used to. The most meaningful part of my work as a peer mentor has been to have a connection to the kids that we help—to know what being homeless feels like and

how they think and to help them work through issues that no one else would be able to understand. I have also worked with numerous organizations, such as the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, to further advance both my career and people's understanding of what being transgender or homeless is like. I plan to continue to expand my advocacy career, with a focus on homelessness; mental illness; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights; and anything else that I think our country needs a bit of help in figuring out.

The main thing I always tell people when asked is that it's all about information. No matter how much I tried to educate my parents or the people around me, it didn't always work. It's important to have allies who can help teach people about the unique needs of transgender youth and the volatile situation of people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Service providers need to know what being transgender means, as well as how to help families learn to accept their children. While they may not be enough on their own, training programs that instill understanding should be operated in every shelter and at every outreach service provider—both for staff as well as for families. My advice is education, understanding, compassion, and protection. That is all we can ask for.

Who are homeless transgender youth?

Detailed information about the demographics of homeless transgender youth is scarce. However, transgender youth report moving away from their parent or guardian for the first time at earlier ages than other homeless youth; the median age in one survey from New York City was 14, two years earlier than other homeless youth.¹² The same survey found that homeless transgender youth also tend to spend more time away from home—double the number of average months away from parents or guardians reported by their counterparts.¹³ Even when compared with lesbian, gay, and bisexual, or LGB, youth—who may or may not also identify as transgender—transgender youth reported a median of 52 months away from parents or guardians, 23 months more than their LGB counterparts.¹⁴ Little data exist on racial or other demographics of transgender homeless youth. However, some research indicates that significant numbers of homeless transgender young people—40 percent, according to one estimate¹⁵—do not identify as either male or female, highlighting the importance for service providers of understanding genderqueer identities.

Data on service utilization by homeless transgender youth are likewise limited. A report to Congress on the runaway and homeless youth programs administered by the Administration for Children and Families found that transgender youth accounted for less than 1 percent of clients in the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System. However, the report also noted that this number could be low due to young people's reluctance to disclose their gender identity or to staff's reluctance to ask for it.¹⁶ A study of homeless youth service providers puts the figure higher, estimating that approximately 4 percent of all clients who utilize housing programs identify as transgender.¹⁷

The New York City survey of homeless youth found that transgender youth used drop-in services at twice the rate of other youth and that they reported higher rates of usage of homeless or runaway services.¹⁸ The survey also found that transgender youth were more likely than other youth to report spending a night with a sex work client; at a hospital, detox, drop-in, or community-based center or in a youth emergency shelter; and were less likely to have spent a night in a transitional housing program.¹⁹ While the numbers of transgender participants in this survey were too small to definitively support these findings or to make generalizations about wider trends, these observations do identify areas in which further research may be useful.

Access to shelter

Transgender youth who are homeless are at risk for a variety of negative health and safety outcomes that stem from the intersections between systematic discrimination and economic hardship. Unfortunately, many services for homeless young people mirror the biases and structural problems that cause them to become homeless. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that access to shelters is uneven. Of respondents ages 18 and older who attempted to use a shelter, 29 percent reported being denied access in connection with their gender identity or expression. Higher rates of being denied shelter—between 40 percent and 45 percent—were reported by black and Latino respondents, noncitizens, those without high school diplomas, and respondents who had lost a job as a result of bias. Transgender women also reported being denied shelter at higher rates than transgender men. Even if permitted entry to a shelter, transgender individuals have no guarantee that they will be able to stay, making longer-term planning difficult: One-quarter of respondents said they were “evicted after their transgender identity or gender-nonconformity became known.”²⁰

In addition to denying services outright, some providers offer services in environments that are no safer than the streets. Shelter staff may force transgender individuals to change their gender presentation or “live as the wrong gender” in order to stay—an experience reported by 42 percent of transgender individuals over age 18 who accessed a shelter in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey.²¹ Shelters often deny transgender youth access to the sleeping and living spaces that correspond to their gender identities and may provide them with substandard accommodations, such as sleeping space on floors or in storage rooms.²² Additionally, more than half of respondents in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey reported experiencing harassment while at a shelter, one-quarter reported physical assault, and 22 percent reported sexual assault. These rates were also significantly higher for respondents of color than white respondents and for transgender women than transgender men.²³ A lack of privacy in crowded or dormitory-style shelters and requirements that overnight shelter clients leave early in the morning make it harder for transgender young people to complete the grooming rituals required to present themselves in a way that feels comfortable, potentially heightening their risk for harassment and decreasing their confidence.²⁴

These data suggest that homeless transgender young people continue to face violence and unequal treatment in the very shelters that should be providing a safe space when there is nowhere else to turn. Although the Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD, prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender identity in the programs it funds,²⁵ few federal protections exist for transgender individuals who utilize programs funded through other government agencies or private sources, including many youth-specific programs. Additionally, HUD has not yet provided guidance on what constitutes equal access to shelters and other services, and mechanisms for enforcement are limited. Navigating this inhospitable landscape is particularly difficult for transgender youth who seek services at gender-specific or gender-segregated shelters, as providers may rely on an individual's identity documents or medical history rather than gender identity in determining eligibility.

The design of shelter and housing programs is also problematic for many transgender youth. Funding for homeless services is frequently attached to restrictions regarding age and length of stay. An insufficient number of beds makes it difficult for young people of all ages to secure space in a shelter. Minors may worry about being reported to law enforcement or child welfare officials when accessing services. Meanwhile, low age cutoffs at youth shelters create unique challenges to accessing age-appropriate services for older transgender youth.²⁶ As a result, transgender young people who have aged out of youth-specific services may turn to programs designed for older adults with drastically different needs and life experiences. Additionally, bureaucratic systems and personal bias mean that some transgender youth need more time than other youth to acquire necessary documentation such as ID cards, qualify for social services or public assistance, find employment, and transition to long-term or independent housing. Inflexible length-of-stay requirements cause short-term shelter programs to force these youth to leave before they have had time to make future arrangements.²⁷ Finally, individual program rules, such as curfews and employment or school enrollment requirements, are problematic for transgender youth whose educational and employment opportunities are limited by systemic discrimination and whose primary forms of affirmation may come from peer-based activities that extend past curfew hours.²⁸

These experiences disrupt access to services and the search for stable housing. In addition to producing physical and emotional trauma, they can send youth back onto the streets or lead them to bounce from shelter to shelter. Indeed, nearly half of respondents to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey who had accessed a shelter reported leaving as a result of poor treatment.²⁹ While these numbers reflect adult homeless individuals as well as youth, they point to troubling trends that must be addressed in shelters that serve all ages.

Paul Hamann³⁰

President, The Night Ministry

The Night Ministry provides housing, health care, and human connection to members of the Chicago community who are struggling with poverty or homelessness. Youth services are for young people between ages 14 and 24, ranging from emergency overnight shelter to up to two years in transitional living.

We have always been an open and affirming organization for LGBT individuals, but it has been a journey for us when it comes to transgender and gender-nonconforming youth. When we opened up our overnight shelter, we became aware that we needed to do a better job. We took a hard look at the way we were operating—everything from hiring transgender employees to doing away with gender-specific bathrooms and gender-specific questions on forms. This was new territory for me and for our leadership, as we realized that we didn't know a lot and needed to learn.

When it comes to the youth we work with, all of our services are low barrier. We understand that youth are not only homeless but also adolescents. It's a crazy time in life. If a youth wants to use one name one day and another name the next, that's perfectly fine with us. We have done a lot of training with our staff, looking at restrictive gender assumptions in our organization and how we can improve. Culturally competent services are also incredibly important, so we do not send transgender young people to agencies where we know they won't be accepted or will have to fill out forms that cause complications related to their gender identity.

Transgender youth are sometimes not sure if they should be on the male floor or the female floor. Our practice is to place them on the floor where they are most comfortable and that is consistent with their identity. We also created a suite between floors for any youth who want extra privacy. It's a gender-neutral space where youth know they can go if they have a specific need.

We started hiring staff that mirrored the demographics of the youth, and we realized we needed to make changes for them as well. We have been eliminating references to gender—for instance, saying that we reach out to “community members” instead of “brothers and sisters in our community.” All employees must have a pre-employment physical due to state requirements, so we now provide an option for new employees to go to a trans-friendly provider.

The fact that we are creating an open and affirming environment means that youth feel safe with us. They have a place to spend the night, which allows them to focus on other things in their lives, whether that be family reunification, longer-term housing, counseling, or an employment program. These are ways of operating that are good not only for transgender youth but for all youth. It is a matter of corporate philosophy, and it is a work in progress. The last thing youth need when they are in need of a bed for the night is to have to worry about their own safety or whether they are going to be questioned or judged. We have to do this for the youth, for their well-being and safety. If not us, then who?

Sex work, violence, and criminalization

Lacking other resources and frequently facing employment discrimination, transgender homeless or unstably housed youth may engage in sex work or survival sex in order to generate income or in return for a place to sleep.³¹ Reports from service providers and researchers suggest that transgender homeless youth engage in survival sex at higher rates than other homeless youth.³² Sex work helps some transgender young people satisfy economic, social, and emotional needs—including, for some, financing transition-related expenses and providing access to community and support from other transgender individuals.³³ However, it is also correlated with significant health and safety risks. Among these are HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, or STIs; according to one study, young transgender women with a history of sex work were four times more likely than their peers without such a history to report having HIV.³⁴

Transgender individuals engaged in sex work experience alarming rates of physical and sexual violence, with research indicating that perpetrators include clients, police officers, and managers or pimps.³⁵ This violence often sits at a convergence of transphobia, misogyny, and racism: The 2013 National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs report on anti-LGBT hate violence in the United States found that 72 percent of anti-LGBT homicide victims were transgender women and that 67 percent were transgender women of color.³⁶ In 2012, 6 of the 25 victims of reported anti-LGBT homicides—or approximately one-quarter of them—were sex workers.³⁷ Data based on reports from sex workers to HIPS, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C., indicate that attacks against transgender sex workers are more likely to involve a weapon, most often a gun, than attacks against sex workers who are not transgender.³⁸

More broadly, transgender homeless youth are at risk for involvement with law enforcement and the juvenile and criminal justice systems as a result of personal bias and policies that criminalize homelessness and sex work. For instance, Amnesty International found that police frequently target and arrest transgender homeless youth for sex work and activities such as trespassing and loitering—even when the youth are not engaging in them.³⁹ Transgender women, particularly transgender women of color, are often profiled as sex workers, resulting in arrests, harassment, and violence at the hands of law enforcement officers.⁴⁰ This continuing history of mistreatment discourages transgender young people from reporting crimes they have experienced.

Policies that treat minors involved in sex work as victims of human trafficking rather than perpetrators of a crime are gaining popularity in some jurisdictions. The best of these safe harbor laws provide an important avenue for youth to avoid unfair criminalization and to obtain supportive services if desired. In other locations, these policies or their implementation lack the flexibility to best serve transgender youth, setting unnecessary restrictions on who can qualify as a victim or pressuring youth to provide testimony against a trafficker that they may be unwilling or unable to give. For instance, many transgender young people involved in sex work have worked independently or primarily with peers, rather than with any sort of manager; others, similar to their cisgender peers, may be reluctant to testify because of complex relationships with a pimp or because they fear retribution.⁴¹ Additionally, courts in some states mandate that youth receive services from providers who may not be culturally competent in serving transgender youth, who do not adequately recognize young people's agency, or who are part of the same child welfare systems that drive many transgender youth onto the streets.⁴²

So-called survival crimes—including shoplifting and selling drugs—also increase the likelihood that youth will become involved with the criminal justice system, as do curfews and policies that prohibit activities such as sitting or lying down in public spaces, panhandling, or public urination.⁴³ Additionally, homeless and transgender youth, especially youth of color, report that law enforcement officers frequently demand to see identification, which may lead to searches, interrogations, tickets, and arrest or detention. Such practices are especially problematic for youth who lack IDs or other identification documents that match their gender identity or expression.⁴⁴ Arrest, detention, conviction, or confinement in juvenile justice or adult facilities place transgender homeless youth at further risk of violence and victimization and can undermine future employment, housing, and educational opportunities, creating a cruel cycle in which criminalization is both caused by and contributes to homelessness.⁴⁵

Health and access to health care

Poor physical and mental health presents a significant challenge for transgender youth who are homeless. According to one study, more than half of service providers reported that homeless transgender youth had worse physical and mental health than their other youth clients, and nearly one-quarter reported it was “much worse.”⁴⁶ This aligns with other research indicating that transgender youth in the general population are at heightened risk of victimization, suicide ideation, and HIV/AIDS.⁴⁷ For instance, one study of young transgender women in Chicago and Los Angeles found that 19 percent of participants self-reported being HIV positive—a number much higher than the prevalence rate in the general population.⁴⁸ Other studies that focused on at-risk populations or used HIV tests rather than self-reporting have found even higher rates of HIV infection. For example, in one study, 35 percent of transgender women across a wide age span were HIV positive.⁴⁹ Research also indicates that black and Latina transgender women are disproportionately more likely to be HIV positive.⁵⁰ The impact of HIV is notably heavy on transgender youth: Newly diagnosed transgender individuals are more likely to be in their teens or 20s than newly diagnosed individuals in the general population.⁵¹

Despite these health risks, homeless transgender young people may experience difficulty in accessing health care. A report compiled for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that staff cited difficulty locating health care providers with expertise in serving transgender people as a significant barrier to improving outcomes for homeless transgender youth.⁵² Homeless transgender youth may also struggle to locate funding for hormone therapies or surgical treatment required as part of their transition, as not all public insurance programs cover these services.⁵³ Denying transgender youth appropriate and medically necessary health care causes some to turn instead to self-administered silicon injections or hormones acquired without a prescription. While these steps provide transgender youth a form of self-determination they are unable to obtain at health care providers, a lack of guidance on dosage and a lack of access to unused needles—as well as unsanitary injection conditions—can increase the risk of stroke and liver damage, the transmission of HIV and Hepatitis C, and other health conditions.⁵⁴

Previous discrimination or negative experiences with health care providers, such as providers making negative remarks about clients' appearances or using the wrong names and gender pronouns, can also alienate transgender youth and complicate their access to care.⁵⁵ As a result, mental health issues such as depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder can go untreated or worsen while youth are on the streets.⁵⁶ Because many transgender youth lack appropriate forms of identification, they frequently face unnecessary hurdles when trying to access health care, as well as other social and educational services and employment opportunities.⁵⁷ Finally, even where health care is accessible, homelessness itself can act as a barrier to following recommended practices outside of health care providers' offices. For instance, adherence to complex HIV treatment regimens can be difficult for homeless or unstably housed young people with inconsistent sleep or meal schedules.⁵⁸

Lacking the tools and resources that support other youth during their journey to adulthood, homeless transgender young people find themselves choosing from an inadequate set of options as they seek to survive and move forward with their lives, often encountering significant barriers to their health, safety, and well-being. While additional research is needed to more fully understand the experiences of transgender young people while homeless and opportunities for positive interventions, existing data and accounts from young people are sufficient to demonstrate that the status quo is unacceptable.

Root causes of homelessness among transgender youth

With the right support from key people in their lives, transgender youth can learn and grow without having to leave home until they are ready. However, transgender youth too often encounter personal prejudice and institutions unequipped to meet their needs. Family rejection, school harassment, antiquated discipline policies, and underresourced social services with inadequate protections against discrimination make a stable adolescence difficult to achieve, driving many transgender youth onto the streets.

Tony Bias⁵⁹

Gay-Straight Alliance Network of California youth leader, 17 years old

My name is Tony, and I am a queer trans guy of color. In September of last year, I was facing homelessness at the age of 17. My dad had taken away my testosterone, or in other words, my identity. I pleaded and begged him to give me back what many transgender folk find medically necessary to their survival. However, despite my cries and confession of suicidal feelings, he refused. He even threatened to put me in a chokehold as my feelings ran high. In a state of distress, I turned to leave the unstable environment. My father stopped me only to take away my cell phone and keys and to lock the door behind me. I spent the rest of that night sleeping outside of a hotel on a bench.

Luckily, after the first night of sleeping outside, I was able to find a homeless youth shelter that would take me in. However, a problematic issue presented itself when the shelter staff first learned that I was a queer trans man. A woman asked me over the phone, "Do you, you know ... look like a guy? Sound like one?" Fortunately, I had been on testosterone for about a year and a half and had the privilege of "passing," but I could not help but think of the many transgender youth who do not have the means or do not want to medically transition. It was obvious she would have denied them access to the room that matched their gender identity.

Sadly, this was not the only troublesome issue that I faced while at the shelter. Upon my arrival, a few of the other homeless youth thought they were aware of my sexual orientation and gender identity, without me being the one to reveal it to them. Apparently, the staff had told the other youth about me. Again, fortunately I am open about both my sexual orientation and gender identity, but my thoughts drifted toward those who are not. The respect for privacy about a youth's sexual orientation and gender identity should be a given.

Many people inherently do not understand what it is like to be a transgender youth. To have your gender invalidated constantly by your friends, teachers, adults, strangers, and then coming home to have it invalidated by your parents, sucks. I do not ask people to understand how we feel or what we go through, but respect for our genders is essential to our well-being and survival as human beings. The solution to homelessness among transgender youth starts with the education of our society, our parents, our friends, our teachers, everyone. We need to do better as people.

Family rejection

Research indicates that family acceptance or rejection has a significant effect on several measures of health and well-being for LGBT youth.⁶⁰ Indeed, family rejection is a leading cause of homelessness for LGBT youth. According to one study of homeless youth service providers, youth running away from home as a result of family rejection of their sexual orientation or gender identity and parents forcing youth to leave home due to their sexual orientation or gender identity were the two primary reasons that their LGBT clients were homeless or at risk for becoming homeless.⁶¹ Many also cited physical, emotional, or sexual abuse within the home.⁶²

Unfortunately, family rejection is all too common for transgender individuals. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that 40 percent of respondents ages 18 and over reported that their parents or other family members refused to speak or spend time with them in response to their gender identity or expression.⁶³ Additionally, the same survey found that 19 percent of respondents had experienced domestic violence from a family member in connection with their gender identity or expression and that these rates were higher for respondents of color.⁶⁴ These experiences had high correlations to homelessness: 26 percent of those who had experienced family rejection had also experienced homelessness, almost three times the percentage of those whose families were accepting, and 48 percent of those who had experienced domestic violence had also experienced homelessness, almost four times the percentage of those whose families were accepting.⁶⁵

While these results include older adults, they suggest alarming patterns that may also be true for transgender youth. In general, transgender youth report low levels of social support, including emotional help and support from their families and other sources.⁶⁶ As a result, transgender youth who experience family rejection or violence may lack access to the economic and social resources—such as an independent income or other trusted adults who are willing to provide housing or financial support—that would help prevent homelessness. This idea is reinforced by findings from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey that suggest that transitioning later in life is inversely related to homelessness.⁶⁷

School push out

An effective school system provides not only the skills and training that students need to pursue further education or enter the workforce but also a safe space for personal growth, positive peer interactions, and supportive adults who can provide mentorship and promote resiliency—especially when life at home is difficult. By these measures, schools too often fail transgender and gender-nonconforming students. The absence of nondiscrimination protections and cultural competency training for school personnel means that many transgender young people attend schools with staff who refuse to use their correct names and pronouns, severely restrict their access to restrooms or locker rooms, and deny them equal participation in sports teams, field trips, and other school activities. Additionally, transgender youth experience high rates of harassment and assault from other students, teachers, security officers, and other school personnel. According to a 2013 survey by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, or GLSEN, significant numbers of transgender students report “sometimes, often, or frequently” feeling unsafe at school—75 percent—experiencing verbal harassment—74 percent—and experiencing physical harassment—33 percent.⁶⁸ This harassment interferes with students’ ability to learn and, importantly, can result in poor attendance due to safety concerns: According to GLSEN, 59 percent of LGBT students who experienced “higher levels of victimization” related to their gender expression reported missing at least one day of school in the previous month—compared with 18 percent of their peers who experienced lower levels of victimization.⁶⁹

Transgender and gender-nonconforming students are also disproportionately targeted by school discipline policies and singled out for harsher punishments than their peers by school personnel, resulting in some instances in removal from the classroom, suspensions, expulsions, and involuntary transfers.⁷⁰ For instance, under zero-tolerance policies, school personnel frequently treat students who are victims of harassment or acting in self-defense as perpetrators of bullying or violence. Similarly, gender-based dress codes punish transgender and gender-nonconforming youth for simply expressing their gender identity.⁷¹ Youth of color are particularly likely to be disciplined under these policies, even though their infractions are no worse than those of their white peers.⁷²

Truancy charges, harsh disciplinary measures, suspensions or expulsions, and school-based arrests frequently lead to involvement with the juvenile justice system, interfere with learning time, and hurt academic achievement. All of these factors reduce the likelihood that transgender students will graduate, a critical

predictor of earnings in today's economy. For instance, a first-time arrest at school doubles the likelihood that a student will drop out, and a court appearance quadruples it.⁷³ Lack of a high school diploma and a stable income puts young people at risk for future housing instability, and in turn, lack of housing complicates the pursuit of further education.

Foster care and juvenile justice

A broken child welfare system serves as a significant driver of homelessness. Family rejection and criminalization mean that transgender youth are disproportionately likely to spend time in out-of-home care. For instance, a recent study of youth in foster care in Los Angeles County found that 5.6 percent were transgender, higher than estimates of the percentage of transgender youth in the general population.⁷⁴ The same study also found that between 9.3 percent and 13.4 percent of youth in foster care were gender nonconforming.⁷⁵

Despite their overrepresentation within the system, transgender and gender-nonconforming youth in foster care face increased discrimination that puts them at elevated risk for homelessness. LGBT youth in foster care are more likely to have a higher number of placements and report being treated worse than their non-LGBT peers, both of which reduce the likelihood of youth forming stable relationships with caregivers and reduce overall well-being. Additionally, transgender youth may be denied appropriate health care, refused gender-appropriate clothing, and assigned to placements that do not meet their needs.⁷⁶

Similarly, studies have indicated that transgender youth experience high rates of abuse within the juvenile justice system. Like their counterparts in foster care, transgender young people in juvenile detention facilities experience physical, verbal, and sexual harassment; are placed in facilities that are inconsistent with their gender identities; are held in isolation; are subjected to conversion therapy efforts; are denied access to appropriate health care; and are prevented from expressing their gender identities.⁷⁷ While many communities have started to implement programs that provide alternatives to detention, others have yet to do so, and access to these is limited for transgender youth. Often, young people who have been arrested or detained are released from custody only into the care of a parent or guardian; for transgender youth who have strained relationships with family, this can result in longer periods of detention, even if they have not been convicted of a crime.⁷⁸ Additionally, some facilities refuse to house transgender youth on the assumption

that they would be unable to keep them safe or that transgender youth will be disruptive. As a result, transgender youth are frequently placed in more restrictive settings than necessary.⁷⁹

Underresourced or outdated systems too often fail to address risk factors for youth homelessness or to equip young people with the skills needed for adult life. Adequate mental health supports are in short supply, and those that are available may not be prepared to serve transgender youth: 77 percent of juvenile justice professionals in one survey said they were “unaware” of local mental health evaluators who had specialized knowledge in working with LGBT youth.⁸⁰ Additionally, although family engagement is an important component of creating effective plans for system-involved young people, foster care and juvenile justice professionals struggle to involve families in meaningful ways—particularly around issues of gender identity.⁸¹

Time spent in foster care or the juvenile justice system has long-term consequences. Bouncing between multiple placements or experiencing detention disrupts education, limits career opportunities, and can result in untreated or exacerbated mental health problems.⁸² When foster placements do not meet the needs of transgender youth to be safe, cared for, and celebrated for who they are, but rather expose them to further harassment and abuse, youth may elect to run away—even if it means becoming homeless.

Additionally, transgender youth who have been involved with systems of out-of-home care may find themselves with no place to go upon leaving those systems. One survey of service providers found that 17 percent of providers cited aging out of the foster care system as one of the primary reasons that their LGBT clients were homeless or at risk of homelessness.⁸³ This aligns with data suggesting that between 12 percent and 36 percent of emancipated youth—those who have aged out—experience homelessness after leaving state care.⁸⁴ Similarly, young people released from juvenile detention often return to unstable housing situations: Their families may be unaccepting; they may lack the financial resources needed to pay their own rent; and for youth who have been convicted of certain offenses, federal policies and local rules may prevent them from returning to public or subsidized housing.⁸⁵ Although little research exists on transgender youth who recently have been involved in systems of state care, additional barriers to achieving stable housing put them at increased risk, including a lack of legislation that prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender identity in 32 states.⁸⁶

The causes of homelessness among transgender youth are complicated, involving both interpersonal prejudices and systemic failures. While transgender young people living through homelessness have a unique set of needs and experiences, their stories share similarities with many other youth, including those in foster care, the juvenile justice system, and unsupportive educational institutions. By addressing the factors that contribute to homelessness among transgender young people, it is possible to build systems that are more effective at providing opportunities for youth with a wide diversity of identities and backgrounds.

Policy recommendations

Reducing homelessness and preventing housing instability for transgender and gender-nonconforming youth is a critical yet complex undertaking. Fortunately, model policies and programs that are already working for transgender youth hold great promise if implemented on a larger scale. Additionally, broader fixes proposed in the areas of child welfare, juvenile justice, education, employment, and housing have the potential to promote significant social and economic advancement for transgender young people. By strategically allocating resources, committing to providing affirming services, implementing large-scale systemic changes, and advancing transgender-specific and transgender-inclusive research, policymakers at the local, state, and national levels can lay the groundwork that transgender youth need to succeed.

Provide resources to obtain housing, education, and employment opportunities

Research indicates that funding for housing and prevention programs aimed at reducing health risk factors can help young people achieve healthier and more prosperous futures and reduce long-term costs to the public. By diverting youth who are ready to learn to live independently from more costly foster care and juvenile justice programs and addressing substance abuse and other health risk behaviors, youth-serving transitional housing programs allow young people to gain skills while saving taxpayer dollars. For instance, estimates suggest that the public would save \$5 million to \$20 million if 500 youth from juvenile justice residential facilities were moved to community-based transitional living programs, where they could access school and employment opportunities.⁸⁷ Similarly, a study in Oregon found that the savings for case management and transitional housing programs amounted to \$7.45 for every \$1 invested.⁸⁸

Reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act with protections for LGBT young people

For 40 years, the programs funded through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act have provided lifesaving services to homeless and at-risk young people and their families, including outreach, crisis intervention, temporary and long-term supportive housing, and case management. The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act is reauthorized every five years and was due for reauthorization in 2013. Congress can ensure that these programs continue to help youth get back on their feet by passing *a bill to reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, and for other purposes*⁸⁹ with adequate funding and including clear nondiscrimination provisions so that federally funded programs meet the needs of homeless transgender youth.

Provide education and employment opportunities that promote skill development

Programs that assist homeless transgender youth in continuing or re-engaging with education and developing career skills are critical to ensure that they have the tools to obtain immediate or future employment. Fully funding programs such as the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program;⁹⁰ removing barriers to higher education such as restrictive financial aid forms and a lack of adequate and affordable student housing; and supporting partnerships that offer job training, career counseling, and apprenticeships to homeless and at-risk transgender youth—as has happened in New York⁹¹ and Chicago⁹²—can help mitigate the disruptive impact of homelessness on education and career readiness.

Fund cost-effective prevention programs aimed at reducing HIV, Hepatitis C, and other health risks

Programs focused on harm reduction and preventing the spread of STIs and other health risks can reduce the health problems that homeless and other at-risk transgender youth experience—and save the public money in the long run. For instance, establishing or strengthening condom distribution programs and ensuring that they reach homeless and transgender individuals are effective ways

to reduce HIV/AIDS rates.⁹³ Similarly, studies show that syringe or needle exchange programs result in significant cost savings by reducing the spread of HIV, Hepatitis C, or other infections among at-risk populations via used or shared needles and syringes.⁹⁴ Programs such as these are of particular importance to homeless transgender youth who are unable to obtain sterile needles and syringes for hormone injections from a health care provider, and they can also improve health outcomes for young people who are using injection drugs. Lifting the ban on using federal funds for syringe and needle exchange programs and targeting homeless transgender youth as program clients would result in health benefits for young people and cost savings for the general public.

Integrate promising practices in family intervention for transgender youth in homeless service programs

While the safety and effectiveness of reuniting with families is different for each homeless young person, promoting new evidence-based practices designed for LGBT youth can assist homeless transgender youth in reconnecting with their families or other supportive adults where such action is safe, desired, and appropriate. Ensuring that homeless and family service providers have access to resources and training from organizations such as the Family Acceptance Project⁹⁵ and funding demonstration projects to further explore best practices in family intervention for transgender youth can help better target family reunification efforts and move youth off the streets and back home.

Implement strong nondiscrimination policies and eliminate barriers to services

Homeless transgender young people must have equal access to the building blocks needed to stabilize their lives. Eliminating discrimination and establishing policies and practices that improve access to vital services will help reduce the health and safety disparities that transgender homeless youth experience in comparison to other homeless youth.

Implement clear nondiscrimination policies and guidance in youth-serving shelters and programs

In 2010, the Department of Housing and Urban Development issued guidance that stated that housing discrimination on the basis of sex would be interpreted to include discrimination based on nonconformity with sex stereotypes, establishing protections for transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals.⁹⁶ HUD followed this guidance with the publication of an Equal Access Rule to establish further specific protections against housing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity in HUD-funded housing.⁹⁷ While these are important steps forward, more work remains. Shelters and programs serving homeless and at-risk transgender youth need clear policies that prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender identity and outline best practices, including incorporating a positive youth development framework and housing youth in a manner consistent with their gender identity and their personal safety,⁹⁸ regardless of whether they receive funding from HUD or from other government or private sources. Further state and federal action is needed from HUD, the Administration for Children and Families, and state agencies in order to establish comprehensive nondiscrimination policies and issue guidance that outlines how providers should fulfill their obligations.

Eliminate transgender coverage exclusions

The exclusion of health care services for transgender individuals from many private insurance and state Medicaid programs has a devastating impact on the physical and mental health of transgender homeless young people. Nondiscrimination language in the Affordable Care Act represented progress in addressing this barrier, but more work remains.⁹⁹ While nine states and the District of Columbia have taken action to end discriminatory exclusions in health coverage for transgender individuals, the rest have yet to follow suit.¹⁰⁰

Ensure that all transgender homeless youth have access to IDs that reflect their gender identity and expression

Lack of identification should never be a barrier for homeless transgender youth attempting to access services or obtain housing or employment. States can reduce documentation challenges for youth by streamlining processes for changing names and gender markers, removing requirements such as surgery,

and working with youth and service providers to address obstacles created by lack of residency for homeless individuals. States and municipalities should also explore alternative mechanisms for facilitating access to IDs for populations facing documentation barriers, such as joining a growing number of cities in establishing municipal ID card programs.¹⁰¹

End the targeting of transgender young people by law enforcement and decriminalize behaviors associated with homelessness and sex work

Criminalizing youth for being transgender, homeless, or engaged in sex work increases their involvement with the juvenile and criminal justice systems, often leads to trauma and victimization, and can result in long-term impacts on the ability to obtain housing, employment, and education. Local, state, and federal policymakers and law enforcement agencies should prohibit profiling based on gender identity or expression as well as factors such as race, ethnicity, and housing status. Eliminating status offenses and policies that criminalize youth for being homeless—including prohibitions against panhandling, lying down in public places, and truancy—is similarly important to ensure that homeless transgender youth are not further punished for the lack of safe housing available to them.

Finally, policymakers and law enforcers should support rather than discourage practices that promote the health and safety of transgender young people engaged in sex work. For instance, states and municipalities should prohibit the use of condoms as evidence of involvement in prostitution-related offenses and avoid confiscating condoms.¹⁰² Policymakers and law enforcement officials also must collaborate with providers and youth to create a more nuanced response to human trafficking that envisions roles for transgender young people beyond victim and perpetrator. Anti-trafficking efforts that empower transgender youth will value rather than criminalize nonexploitative peer networks and will center youth voices by using positive youth development models that engage young people as key decision makers in determining their future plans. They should provide adequate funding for nonmandatory services that are culturally competent and trauma informed, and they should establish alternatives to funneling youth into child welfare or juvenile justice programs from which they have already run away due to abuse or discrimination.¹⁰³

Address the root causes of homelessness

Ending homelessness for transgender young people means not only meeting the immediate needs of homeless youth but also interrupting the cycles of poverty, violence, and discrimination that cause and perpetuate homelessness. These structural changes must pay particular attention to the ways in which current policies and practices disproportionately penalize young transgender people who are immigrants and undocumented, who are individuals of color, who have limited financial resources, and who have disabilities.

Pass state and federal legislation that prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression

When transgender youth are evicted from or denied housing; fired from their jobs or passed over during hiring processes; harassed at or pushed out of school; and refused equal treatment in shelters, public transportation, hospitals, and other public accommodations, they are deprived of the opportunities they need to support themselves. Passage of federal and state legislation that prohibits such discrimination is critical to ensure that transgender youth do not have to silence who they are in order to access the basic necessities they need to avoid or exit homelessness.¹⁰⁴

Pass strong anti-bullying policies and reduce school disciplinary mechanisms that disproportionately harm transgender youth

Building welcoming school environments for transgender students helps reduce drop-out rates,¹⁰⁵ equip youth with the skills they need to succeed as young adults, and ensure that they have at least one safe place in their communities where they can be themselves. Federal legislation such as the Safe Schools Improvement Act,¹⁰⁶ as well as state and local policies that prohibit bias-based bullying and include enumerated protections for transgender youth, can improve the safety and success of all students, reducing hostile school environments in which transgender youth are all too often targeted by bullying or by policies that punish them for being caught up in cycles of violence and victimization. For similar reasons, schools, states, and federal policymakers should seek to limit practices such as zero-tolerance policies that funnel students into

the juvenile justice system through the school-to-prison pipeline, which disproportionately targets transgender and gender-nonconforming students, particularly those of color. This includes revising dress codes and codes of conduct, reducing or removing funding for in-school law enforcement officers, eliminating vague status offenses such as “willful defiance,” and promoting restorative justice practices and positive behavioral interventions through local policies and state and federal legislation.¹⁰⁷

Implement reforms in the juvenile justice and foster care systems that affirm transgender identities and support youth who are aging out

Because transgender youth are disproportionately likely to spend time in foster care or the juvenile justice system, ensuring that these institutions are equipped to support transgender youth both while they are there and as they leave is critical to reducing the likelihood that these youth will become homeless. At a minimum, all juvenile justice and foster care providers should adopt clear policies that prohibit discrimination and harassment based on gender identity; establish best practices for supporting transgender youth; and require cultural competency training for staff, volunteers, and foster families. Resources from organizations including the Equity Project, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, the Child Welfare League of America, and Lambda Legal¹⁰⁸ and policies from Massachusetts, New York state, and New York City¹⁰⁹ can serve as models. Such policies and training should be required through contracts with the state and federal agencies that provide funding and oversight.

Additionally, child welfare and juvenile justice professionals should avoid using gender identity as a justification for placing transgender youth in more restrictive settings than are necessary and should seek to employ community-based programs, independent and transitional living programs, and alternatives to detention where appropriate. Finally, foster care and juvenile justice systems must establish or strengthen supports and services for youth who are exiting or aging out to ensure they have the housing, health care, employment and educational opportunities, and mentorship that they need to transition smoothly to adulthood.

Create additional affordable housing units and expand rental assistance programs

Without access to affordable housing in their communities, the ability of transgender youth to house themselves is limited—particularly when combined with the economic impact of employment and education discrimination. Federal, state, and local investment in affordable housing is key to ensure that economically disadvantaged and unstably housed transgender youth do not become homeless. This requires community planning and government financing to protect affordable housing that already exists and to support the creation of new, affordable housing units. Expanding the availability of rental assistance programs such as the Section 8 housing-choice voucher program and reducing eligibility screening requirements, such as those related to criminal records, is also a core component of making housing accessible to young people at risk for homelessness.¹¹⁰

Expand data-collection efforts to respectfully and confidentially include gender identity

While research on LGBT youth homelessness has expanded rapidly in recent years, large-scale data collection remains limited. Research, data collection, and analysis often leave out transgender youth in particular—a challenge born both out of a small population size and a lack of public awareness. Greater attention to the number of homeless transgender youth and to the disparities they experience is vital to ensure that proposed solutions to youth homelessness adequately address the needs of transgender young people. Additionally, further research can refine methodologies for asking about and recording gender identity in sensitive and age-appropriate ways.

Provide guidance to continuums of care and communities on asking for, recording, and reporting gender identity

Although they may not capture all youth who are homeless or unstably housed, point-in-time and homeless youth counts are an important tool for local, state, and national policymakers and advocates in creating demographic snapshots of homeless populations and assessing the scope of need. The interagency Youth Count! initiative and subsequent process study from the Urban Institute¹¹¹ provided valuable best practices and lessons learned from participating commu-

nities, such as integrating homeless or formerly homeless LGBT youth into the design and execution of counts. More specific recommendations and guidance from HUD on transgender-inclusive data collection and reporting is necessary to create an accurate understanding of transgender homeless youth populations. Such guidance should address the ways in which a variety of factors—including race, ethnicity, age, and language—may influence survey administrator and respondent understandings of homelessness, gender identity, and other demographic descriptors. Responsibility also lies with continuums of care—the local and regional planning bodies that coordinate homelessness services—to seek out best practices and to commit to following relevant guidance and recommendations from HUD and other sources.

[Provide best practices on collecting gender identity data to providers](#)

Inconsistent collection and recording of gender identity data by runaway and homeless youth providers exacerbates gaps in knowledge about how well federally funded programs are serving transgender youth. Guidance from the Administration for Children and Families on best practices for providers in asking for or recording disclosures of gender identity, along with creative strategies and technical assistance for situations in which questions on gender identity may be particularly sensitive, would increase the quality of data collected through the Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System.

Conclusion

A safe and consistent place to live is a critical prerequisite for academic achievement, good physical and mental health, and career development—all of which are, in turn, important for housing stability as adults. For transgender young people, obstacles to success accumulate at each stage of this cycle, pushing the promise of equal opportunity ever further away.

The journey to adulthood contains challenges for all youth, no matter who or where they are. A struggle to meet basic needs—including housing, education, health care, the presence of caring adults, and affirmation—should never have to be part of that journey. Proposals for ending homelessness among transgender youth should be comprehensive in scope. The dream for transgender young people must be bigger than four walls and a roof, encompassing all the elements that youth need not only to survive but also to thrive. As transgender youth living through homelessness raise their voices to articulate their hopes and fears, it is time for the nation to hear them and to act.

About the author

Hannah Hussey is a Research Associate for LGBT Progress at the Center for American Progress. Prior to joining the Center, she served as coordinator for the Massachusetts Commission on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning Youth, an independent state agency dedicated to recommending policies, programs, and resources for LGBT youth to thrive. In that role, Hussey helped write and implement policy recommendations to 15 state agencies on topics including education, health, foster care, juvenile justice, housing, immigration, transportation, and workforce development. She also led an initiative to create a comprehensive map and database of culturally competent services available to LGBT youth throughout the state to improve accessibility and identify resource gaps.

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