



# Runaway and Homeless Youth Act Should Include Gay and Transgender Youth

These Youth Experience Homelessness at Much Higher Rates

Melissa Dunn and Jeff Krehely May 2012

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (which in 2008 was reauthorized by the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act), or RHYA, will be considered for reauthorization in Congress in 2013.<sup>1</sup> This act is a major piece of legislation that helps combat youth homelessness by funding various support services and educational programs for homeless youth across the country.

The act makes no mention, however, of gay<sup>2</sup> and transgender youth, even though these groups make up a disproportionately large number of homeless youth in America. Incorporating gay and transgender youth into the act when it comes up for reauthorization will make sure that RHYA funds are used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

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## Gay and transgender youth are more likely to be homeless than other youth

Although they comprise only 5 percent to 7 percent of all youth in America, gay and transgender youth make up 7 percent to 40 percent of all homeless youth in America.<sup>3</sup> According to a recent Center for American Progress issue brief,<sup>4</sup> these high rates of homelessness are in part attributable to youth coming out as gay or transgender at younger ages. As the coming-out age decreases, gay and transgender youth risk family rejection (and even violence from their family members) at a time when they are emotionally, physically, financially, and materially dependent on their families. Further, gay and transgender youth often face rejection, harassment, and abuse from peers at school, where they are more likely to skip school, or even drop out, to avoid being bullied.

In short, gay and transgender youth face a high risk of rejection and abuse from two central support networks in a young person's life: family and school. As a result, many turn to the streets as a way to escape the treatment they face in these two settings.

Once on the streets gay and transgender homeless youth face harsh conditions and fare worse than other homeless youth. For example, gay and transgender homeless youth are more likely to be propositioned for “survival sex” (i.e., exchanging sex for money, which is needed to buy food or secure short-term shelter) and to engage in high-risk behaviors like drug and alcohol use.

What’s more, gay and transgender youth who seek help in homeless shelters can face just as much abuse and mistreatment in those settings as they do on the streets. Gay and transgender homeless youth report being discriminated against, sexually and physically assaulted by staff, and being physically harassed by other peers at higher rates than straight youth and youth who are not transgender in the same shelters. These conditions lead many gay and transgender youth to turn once again to the streets.

The conditions that cause gay and transgender youth to become homeless, as well as the problems that they face once on the street, have serious human and economic costs, including a higher risk of being abused or attacked, poor health outcomes, lower educational attainment, and longer-term job insecurity. Legislative action is needed to ensure that these youth no longer make up a disproportionate part of the homeless youth population and that they are treated the same as other youth when they seek help from shelters and other service providers. Congress has an opportunity to take such action with the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.

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## What does the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act do?

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act consists of three major types of programs for homeless youth: Street Outreach, Basic Center Programs, and Transitional Living Programs. The Street Outreach program provides funds to community organizations that offer support and educational programs to youth living on the streets, and to engage those who are at risk of becoming homeless. The Basic Center Program funds drop-in centers for youth under the age of 18, as well as counseling services and reunification guidance for those looking to reconnect with their families. Finally, Transitional Living Program dollars support centers for youth under the age of 22 who need temporary housing and social support services while they look for jobs and housing of their own.

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act awards grants to public and private organizations (including faith-based) that provide these types of services. In 2006, 140 Street Outreach Program providers received RHYA grants, which helped them reach 402,207 youth with an average cost of \$37 per contact.<sup>5</sup> That same year, 328 Basic Center Programs received grants, served 37,648 children and youth at an average cost of \$1,282 per youth.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, in 2006, 207 Transitional Living Programs received RHYA grants, serving 2,683 youth at an average cost of \$14,726 per youth.<sup>7</sup> These costs are far below what it costs to serve youth through the child welfare or juvenile justice systems (which ranges from \$25,000 to \$55,000 per youth).<sup>8</sup>

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## Congress should incorporate gay and transgender youth into the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act

The current version of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act makes no mention of gay and transgender youth despite their disproportionate numbers among the youth homeless population and evidence that they face such trying and dangerous circumstances on the streets and in shelters. Congress should explicitly incorporate gay and transgender youth into the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act when the program is considered for reauthorization in 2013. This can be done in four main ways.

First, Congress should adopt a general statement of nondiscrimination for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act that includes sexual orientation and gender identity. This would prohibit grant recipients using RHYA funds from discriminating against gay and transgender youth.

Second, Congress should require RHYA grant applicants to include gay and transgender youth in any planning documents that are currently needed to qualify for a grant. For example, Section 312 of the current RHYA requires that organizations applying for funds through the Basic Center Program must submit a plan that includes 13 different components, which often focus on the specific characteristics of the youth who will be served. Gay and transgender youth should be added to these requirements where appropriate. Similarly, in Section 322 of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, the Transitional Living Program requires a range of planning documentation. Congress should also update these components and expand them to include gay and transgender youth. These requirements will help service providers think through the unique circumstances and needs of all their clients, including those who are gay and transgender.

Third, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act establishes programs that help alleviate family crises that could lead to youth becoming homeless. Congress should expand these programs to explicitly include efforts that help the families of gay and transgender youth better accept those individuals when they come out. San Francisco State University's [Family Acceptance Project](#) could serve as the model for this type of programming.<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, Section 345 of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act requires the Department of Health and Human Services, or HHS, to submit a report to Congress on the "incidence and prevalence of youth homelessness" in the United States. Information about gay and transgender youth homelessness should be added to the list of data that Congress asks HHS to include in this report. Better data and information on the gay and transgender youth population will help policymakers, service providers, researchers, and advocates better understand how to best serve these individuals.

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## Conclusion

Although gay and transgender youth make up a small part of the overall youth population, they are disproportionately represented in the overall homeless youth population. What's more, gay and transgender youth experience some of the worst conditions among all homeless youth. If Congress wants to make sure that RHYA funds are used as efficiently and effectively as possible, it should acknowledge the disproportionately large gay and transgender youth homeless population and its needs when the bill is reauthorized in 2013.

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## Endnotes

- 1 *Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act of 2008*, Public Law 110-378, 110th Cong. (October 8, 2008), available at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-110publ378/pdf/PLAW-110publ378.pdf>.
- 2 In this column, the term "gay" is used as an umbrella term for people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
- 3 Nico Sifra Quintana, Josh Rosenthal, and Jeff Krehely, "On the Streets: The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2012), available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/06/pdf/lgbtyouthhomelessness.pdf>.
- 4 Melissa Dunn and Jeff Krehely, "Supporting Gay and Transgender Youth Most in Need" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2012), available at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2012/03/supporting\\_lgbt\\_youth.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2012/03/supporting_lgbt_youth.html).
- 5 "The Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act of 2008 (S. 2982, Public Law 110-378)," available at <http://www.nn4youth.org/news/network-news/2008/09/28/reconnecting-homeless-youth-act-2008-s-2982-public-law-110-378>.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 "Family Acceptance Project," available at <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>.