

# Missed Opportunities: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America

The second in a series of Research-to-Impact briefs by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago on understanding and addressing youth homelessness.

*Missed Opportunities: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America* highlights research related to the specific experiences of young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) and face homelessness. We learned that, compared to heterosexual and nontransgender youth, LGBTQ youth are disproportionately represented among the nearly 4.2 million youth and young adults in America who experienced some form of homelessness during a 12-month period. They also face a higher risk of early death and other adversities. On the positive side, this research points to actionable opportunities to better meet the needs of LGBTQ young people in our collective efforts to end youth homelessness.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Voices of Youth: Isabel's Story

Isabel, a young person living in Chicago, was one of the 215 young people engaged through the Voices of Youth Count in-depth interviews. Isabel identifies as African American and transgender\* and experienced housing instability throughout her childhood, as her family moved around a lot. Both of her parents were incarcerated at different times. Isabel began discovering her sexual identity in adolescence: “I was gay at first...[my parents] were okay with me being gay.” Once Isabel entered college, she realized she was transgender and began wearing makeup and painting her nails. Her mother was accepting, but Isabel's father was not. He became verbally abusive, calling her “faggot...[and] a whole bunch of homophobic slurs.”

In spite of this adversity and emerging struggles with depression, Isabel finished her first year of college. Her parents began pressuring her to get a job, but she could not find work. When her father began threatening to kick her out of the family home, Isabel left preemptively. She quickly found herself with no place to stay. The local police found her after a night on the street and took her to a shelter.

Today, Isabel primarily moves back and forth between two shelters on the north side of Chicago. Isabel describes them as affirming of her needs as a transgender young person. “They just help me a lot,” she explained, “more than anyone else that's ever helped me.” Isabel maintains a strong relationship with her grandmother, who supports her occasionally with bus fare and overnight stays. “She helps me a lot...she's been really nice.” Isabel aims to return to college this fall and hopes to secure stable housing within a year.

\* An asterisk indicates that the term is defined in the glossary.

## Voices of Youth Count: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America

This Research-to-Impact brief is the second in a series that draws on multiple research components from Voices of Youth Count. Adolescence and young adulthood represent a critical developmental window. Every day that young people like Isabel experience the stress of housing instability represents missed opportunities to support their healthy development and transitions to productive adulthood. Voices of Youth Count elevates the voices of young people like Isabel across our nation who lack the necessary support and resources to achieve independence and make their unique contributions to our society. Throughout this brief, we highlight key findings and new evidence on LGBTQ\* youth homelessness.

The development of one's sexual orientation\* and gender identity are distinct developmental phases for young people. Each phase is tied to a unique set of experiences and, sometimes, stigmas. The process of “coming out” and navigating life as a person who identifies as gay or bisexual can be a very different experience than coming out and navigating life as a person who identifies as transgender. As Isabel's story underscores, youth who identify as transgender are often especially marginalized. Where possible, this report speaks specifically to findings for youth who identify as transgender, but, in many cases, the measures combine gender identity and sexual orientation or the sample sizes for transgender youth were too small to separate.

Finally, many LGBTQ youth are also members of racial or cultural communities that experience hardships for different reasons. This interconnectedness—also called intersectionality—plays an important role in solving the challenge of youth homelessness. By appreciating the overlapping and interdependent ways that discrimination and disadvantage occur, we are in a better position to identify and address the complex, cumulative ways that race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other characteristics shape youth experiences in America.

## Key Findings - Overview

LGBTQ youth in America are highly diverse and experience homelessness\* differently. Nevertheless, several key findings about their experiences point the way toward policies, systems, and services that LGBTQ youth need:

- LGBTQ youth had over twice the rate of early death among youth experiencing homelessness.
- LGBTQ youth are at more than double the risk of homelessness compared to non-LGBTQ peers.
- Youth who identified as both LGBTQ and black or multiracial had some of the highest rates of homelessness.
- Among youth experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ young people reported higher rates of trauma and adversity.
- Transgender youth often face unique and more severe types of discrimination and trauma.

The research also showed that most LGBTQ youth became homeless not in the immediate aftermath of “coming out” but in large part as the result of family instability and frayed relationships over time. Lastly, young people’s sense of whether service agencies were safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth often informed their decisions about whether to engage with them.

These findings signal opportunities for preventing homelessness and underscore the importance of services that help young people

re-establish positive and reliable connections in their lives.

## Moving Toward Solutions

As a nation, we are missing opportunities to ensure that all young people can reach their full potential and contribute to stronger communities and economies across the country. While two studies<sup>1,2</sup> identified in the Voices of Youth Count systemic evidence review (brief forthcoming) indicate promising findings related to serving LGBTQ youth, the overall lack of evidence of what works in serving this subpopulation of young people limits our ability to identify specific programs or practices as effective. We need more rigorous evaluation of the impacts of systems and services on LGBTQ youth. Our research does, however, highlight critical systemic changes that could be made now to address LGBTQ youth homelessness.

Voices of Youth Count identifies implications and recommendations for policymakers, leaders of public systems, and practitioners that can be leveraged to make changes. Recommendations are intended to serve as the beginning of a dialogue about tangible changes to the nation’s laws, regulations, systems, and programs, not as an end point. Voices of Youth Count will speak to the evidence while seeking solutions.

**No more missed opportunities.**



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**No more missed opportunities.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Support and provide incentives for community organizations and systems to institute more sensitive data collection about sexual orientation and gender identity, facilitate positive adult connections in LGBTQ youths' lives, offer enhanced training on issues facing LGBTQ youth, and, most importantly, engage LGBTQ youth as full partners in strengthening systems and services. **See Findings 1 and 3.**
- ❖ Equitably locate LGBTQ-sensitive outreach, services, and housing options in or near predominantly black and multiracial communities. **See Finding 1.**
- ❖ Take advantage of programs offered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to ensure equal access and housing choice and aid community efforts to address the needs of minority youth and their families. **See Finding 1.**
- ❖ Especially where family engagement can lead to strengthening and support, develop and use therapeutic approaches for LGBTQ youth and their families. Ensure that interventions address trauma, stigma, and discrimination. Capitalize on federally funded runaway and homeless youth programs, such as Basic Center Programs that offer short-term shelter and family and youth counseling. **See Finding 2.**
- ❖ Add or revise guidance in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Block Grant on how these resources can better support LGBTQ and minority LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. **See Finding 2.**

- ❖ Increase the competencies and training access for Medicaid health and behavioral health providers about the added challenges that LGBTQ youth face, including specific professional development for serving transgender youth. **See Finding 2.**
- ❖ Evaluate the most promising programs and interventions to determine their effectiveness for LGBTQ youth. The federal government can take the lead by providing evaluation funding for core interventions. **See Findings 3 and 4.**
- ❖ Facilitate peer-to-peer learning and technical assistance across HUD-funded Continuums of Care (CoCs)\* so that providers can foster more welcoming, nurturing, safe, and trusted options for LGBTQ youth. **See Finding 4.**





## VOICES OF YOUTH COUNT

Voices of Youth Count is a national research and policy initiative designed to fill critical gaps in the nation's knowledge about unaccompanied homelessness among youth and young adults, ages 13 to 25. Voices of Youth Count involved vast data collection and integrated a wide range of perspectives. The main research components included the following:

- **National Survey:** A nationally representative phone-based survey that interviewed 26,161 people about their self-reported experiences of youth homelessness or the experiences of youth in their households. Detailed follow-up interviews were also conducted with a subsample of 150 people who reported any youth homelessness or couch surfing\* (staying with others and lacking a safe and stable living arrangement).
- **Youth Counts & Brief Youth Survey:** Point-in-time counts of youth experiencing homelessness in 22 counties across the country with 4,139 brief surveys of youths' self-reported experiences and characteristics.
- **Continuums of Care & Provider Survey:** Surveys with 25 Continuums of Care (CoCs) leads and 523 diverse service providers on services and programs delivered in the 22 Youth Count communities.
- **In-depth Interviews:** Detailed qualitative and quantitative interviews with 215 young people experiencing homelessness in five communities.
- **Administrative Data Analysis:** Analysis of various forms of administrative data from multiple communities, including data from the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) that all HUD-funded homeless services agencies and organizations are required to use; OrgCode, Inc. intake assessment and homelessness systems data; U.S. Department of Education data on student homelessness; and the Foster Care Data Archive—a longitudinal data warehouse containing decades of state data on children in over two dozen states who spent time in foster care—on runaway occurrences.
- **Systematic Evidence Review:** A comprehensive synthesis of evidence on programs and practices from evaluations of interventions to prevent or address youth homelessness.
- **Policy & Fiscal Review Analysis:** Review of statutory and regulatory entry points for policy action on youth homelessness and focus group discussions with 25 cross-system stakeholders in five communities.

# Four Major Findings

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**Finding 1.** LGBTQ youth are at high risk for homelessness compared to other groups

**Finding 2.** LGBTQ youth experience high levels of adversity, including early death

**Finding 3.** Homelessness stems from multiple factors beyond "coming out" among LGBTQ youth

**Finding 4.** Safe, affirming responses and services are important for engaging LGBTQ youth

## Finding 1. LGBTQ youth are at high risk for homelessness compared to other groups

### LGBTQ youth have an especially high risk for homelessness.

According to the national survey,<sup>3</sup> young adults, ages 18 to 25, who identified as LGBTQ experienced homelessness within the last 12 months at over twice the rate of their heterosexual peers who identified as their birth gender (“cisgender”). Young people who identified as LGBTQ made up about 20% of those young adults who reported homelessness. In larger, urban communities, the proportions of youth experiencing homelessness who identified as LGBTQ were higher than for smaller, more rural communities, and reached up to 40% of homeless youth in one county’s youth count. Given that many young people may be reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity in a survey, these statistics should be viewed as conservative estimates, especially in households and communities where there is less acceptance of LGBTQ people.

**Black youth who identified as LGBTQ—especially young men—had the highest rates of homelessness.** Our findings underscore the substantial vulnerability of youth who belong to more than one high-risk subgroup. According to the national survey, nearly one in four young black men, ages 18 to 25, who identified as LGBTQ reported explicit homelessness\* in the last 12 months. Youth who identified as black or multiracial in the youth counts across 22 counties had similarly high rates of homelessness, especially if they also identified as LGBTQ. Given the disproportionately high numbers of LGBTQ young people and youth of color who experience homelessness, there is a strong rationale for putting them at the center of efforts to prevent and address youth homelessness in order to end youth homelessness overall.

## Figure 1. LGBTQ youth at greater risk of homelessness



2.2x

LGBTQ youth

had 2.2 times the risk of reporting homelessness.

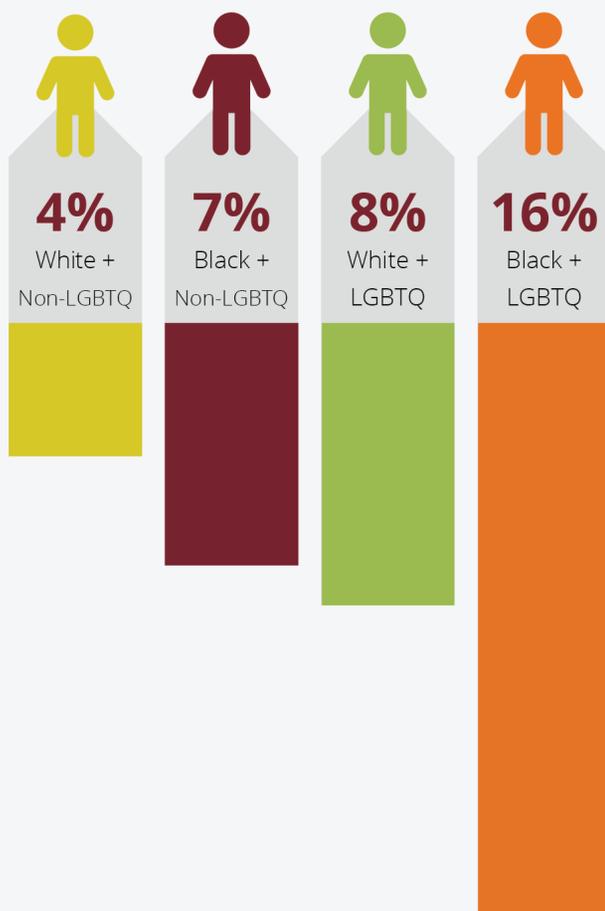
### *Implications and Recommendations*

**Responding strategically to the disproportionate risk of homelessness among LGBTQ youth, especially LGBTQ youth of color, starts with collecting, using, and sharing data disaggregated by sexual orientation, gender identity, race, and ethnicity.** With very few exceptions, we simply do not know whether LGBTQ youth access services at similar rates, remain engaged in those services, or benefit similarly or differently compared to other youth. We also do not know how race or other social identities relate to the effectiveness of these interventions. Federal agencies with homelessness programs and mandates can issue guidance and reporting requirements regarding LGBTQ youth tailored to their specific federal programs.

At the community level, Voices of Youth Count advises communities, CoCs, homeless providers, child welfare systems, and school systems across the country to engage in more sensitive data collection and strengthen their measurement of sexual orientation and gender identity in research, administrative data collection, and service assessment.

## Figure 2. Youth who are black *and* LGBTQ reported the highest rates of homelessness

Explicit homelessness over the last 12 months, self-reported by young adults, ages 18-25. These estimates do not include reports of couch surfing only.



(Source: VoYC National Survey)

Data should be collected at intake and at follow-up points (given that identification can change over time) in line with best measurement practices on this issue. Particular attention must also be paid to the difficulties of identification in rural communities where LGBTQ youth may feel greater personal risk in disclosing their orientation. Critically, LGBTQ youth should be engaged as full partners in interpreting data to inform smarter systems and services to address their needs.

**Communities should ensure that LGBTQ-sensitive outreach, drop-in centers, services, and housing options are located in or near communities most affected by homelessness.**

Where program locations do not allow the LGBTQ youth of color population to access services easily, communities can plan for shifting the locations of services or finding ways to make access easier for communities most affected by homelessness, such as predominantly black neighborhoods. Service providers can also help facilitate these young people's development of positive connections to caring adults in and around their communities as informal sources of support.

**Given that homelessness affects black and multiracial LGBTQ youth at higher levels, HUD's Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) may hold part of the solution.** This rule requires that communities include an inclusive planning processes. Fair housing goals and priorities can inform investments and other key decisions at the local level. HUD and communities should include the needs of minority and LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness and their families in their fair housing efforts to increase choice and equal access. Adequately resourcing, designing, and evaluating street outreach programs—including drop-in centers—can also play a critical role in identifying LGBTQ youth in positive and supportive ways, reducing harm, and linking them and their families to critical services.

### Finding 2. LGBTQ youth experience high levels of adversity, including early death

Youth experiencing homelessness generally have much higher rates of early death than their stably housed peers. Based on analysis of homelessness management information system (HMIS) data across 16 communities, **we found that LGBTQ youth had over twice the rate of early death among youth experiencing homelessness.**

**Similarly, while virtually all youth facing homelessness experience adversity, LGBTQ youth describe particularly pervasive exposure to trauma both before and during their periods of homelessness.**

In the in-depth interviews, individuals who identified as LGBTQ reported more physical harm from others versus their non-LGBTQ peers (62% vs. 47%) and more harm to themselves (25% vs. 15%). Identifying as LGBTQ was associated with much higher rates of experiencing discrimination or stigma within the family (64% vs. 37%) and outside of the family (60% vs. 37%). LGBTQ young people were also more likely to report exchanging sex for basic needs (27% vs. 9%) and having been forced to have sex (38% vs. 15%).

These findings illustrate why it is critical that new efforts emerge to integrate safe spaces, rapid and sustained exits from homelessness, positive adult connections, and culturally attuned mental and physical health supports into service plans for LGBTQ young people.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

One of the most serious findings of all—the increased rate of death among LGBTQ youth who are homeless—is a stark reminder that planning now for a public health prevention approach is critical. The higher death rate and exposure to other adversities among LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness warrants prompt action.

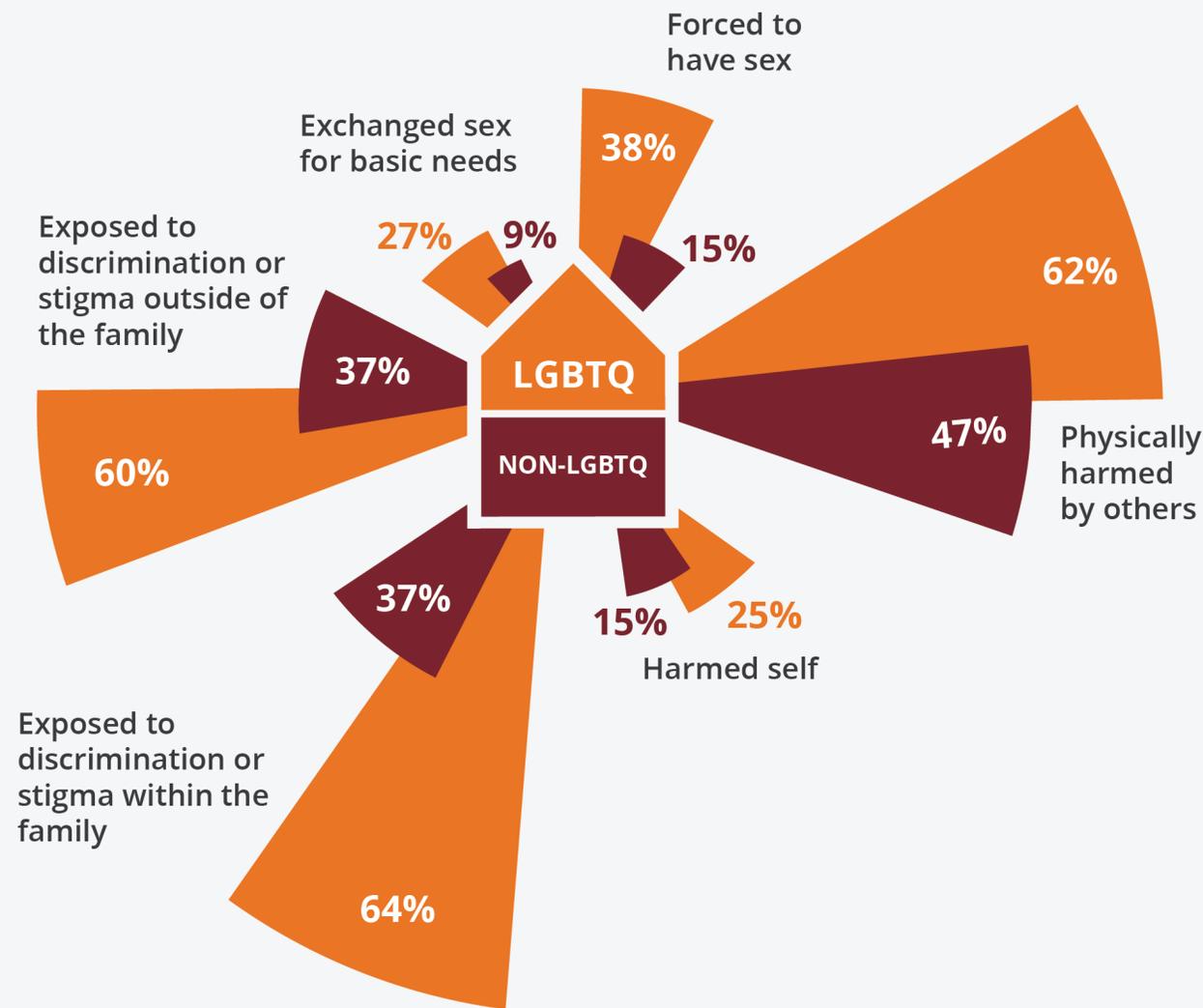
Specifically, programs need to center explicitly around the needs of the LGBTQ youth population across systems. Hospitals, community-based health centers, faith-based organizations, schools, and local law enforcement can act in coordinated ways to identify, engage, and serve LGBTQ youth. The data on early death has the power to rally and call communities to coordinated action, and we encourage communities to use it. One immediate solution might be to improve Medicaid guidance on these issues. Because the majority of these young people are eligible for Medicaid, these are service avenues to help address their physical and behavioral health issues. Medicaid resources can be used to improve the competencies and training so that health and behavioral health providers take into account the challenges of violence, sexual exploitation and risk, mental health problems, substance use as a coping strategy, stigma, and trauma that LGBTQ youth face.

Our findings reinforce the need for trauma-informed services, especially during adolescence and young adulthood, when unaddressed trauma can have long-term consequences. We recommend strengthening the national public health system's ability to address the trauma, stigma, and marginalization experienced by LGBTQ and minority youth experiencing homelessness.



**While virtually all youth facing homelessness experience adversity, LGBTQ youth describe particularly pervasive exposure to trauma both before and during their periods of homelessness.**

**Figure 3.** LGBTQ youth endured especially high levels of adversity among youth experiencing homelessness



(Source: VoYC In-Depth Interviews)

Over the past several years, to the credit of the service provider and technical assistance community, trauma-informed approaches to engaging young people experiencing homelessness have increased. Program developers and technical assistance providers can create and strengthen tools that also address the overall trauma experienced by LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, including racism, transphobia, and stigma. Given our findings of exposure to discrimination and stigma within families, multigenerational therapeutic approaches for families need to be developed, particularly for circumstances in which family engagement and acceptance can lead to family strengthening or reunification. In many instances, LGBTQ young people who experience homelessness are eligible for services across systems. When administering SAMHSA Block Grant resources, for example, states are currently encouraged to consider LGBTQ needs. By updating guidance on how those resources can better support LGBTQ and minority LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, states can make progress in serving this subpopulation. These considerations should also be incorporated into the multiple SAMHSA training efforts underway to improve behavioral health service delivery and outcomes for LGBTQ youth.

### **Finding 3. Homelessness stems from multiple factors beyond "coming out" among LGBTQ youth**

**Common notions of LGBTQ youth being evicted by families into homelessness after "coming out" are overly simplistic and obscure important opportunities for family-based intervention to prevent youth homelessness.**

According to our in-depth interviews, homelessness was rarely an "event" in which young people immediately shifted abruptly from stable housing to homelessness. While coming out to parents and identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender mattered, these youth typically described a gradual escalation of the parent-child conflict over time, or a growing sense of rejection in the home, rather than an immediate reaction to the disclosure that caused homelessness. The positive implication is that there is often more time and opportunity than commonly assumed to intervene with LGBTQ youth and their families to prevent difficult situations from devolving to homelessness.

**Typically, the young person's sexual orientation or gender identity is only one factor involved in household tensions.** Most families also faced broader issues of instability, including poverty, loss, violence, addiction, mental health problems, or housing troubles. These dynamics preceded, or coincided with, the youth's identity or coming out process.

Additionally, discrimination that youth faced within their families often came from a parent's significant other or a sibling. As Isabel's story illustrates, the rejection youth experience in their families can differ from one family member to another and can be shaped by differences in the stigma attached to gender versus sexual identity.

The fact that homelessness was often the product of escalated tension over time for many LGBTQ young people suggests that there is an opportunity to support young people and their families at earlier stages of difficulty. The findings also suggest that intervening around other stressors that families face (like poverty, single parenthood, parental addiction, and mental health) could have direct positive implications for addressing this subpopulation's homelessness.

**Families are sources of both hardship and strength.** While family relations can be a source of rejection for LGBTQ young people, they often have allies within the same household or extended family network who are and can be important resources for programs and systems to engage in young people's service plans. Isabel, for example, maintained a strong relationship with her grandmother even as her parents abused and disowned her. Family engagement can be tremendously powerful for young people in kindling or rekindling positive connections to promote healing individually and at the family level.

**For LGBTQ youth, finding positive connections outside of the biological family is also especially important.** One young person, Joe, spoke of the importance of connections at his local agency for LGBTQ youth where he felt safe and affirmed, "I gained family and friends there.... I'd rather see them more than my friends." Given this level of comfort, Joe fully engaged with and trusted this provider. He now benefits from their services, "They gave me resources and staff to talk to... [Sarah] was real kind in really helping me out. And she still helps me out... to this day." Joe's experience is consistent with previous evidence on the benefits of LGBTQ youth having social supports from peers and nonfamily adults—often who themselves identified as LGBTQ.<sup>4,5</sup> In a world of negative, conflicting, or inaccurate messages about being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer these LGBTQ-accepting connections can be critical.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

**Engaging family members in a nuanced way can strengthen the supports available to LGBTQ youth.** By challenging the notion of family rejection as the only or dominant narrative for LGBTQ youth and recognizing the complex and different reactions within families, we can support youth better. The research suggests that there are several early entry points across different public systems where interventions to address family issues can occur.



Young people want to be accepted and seen not simply for their gender or sexual identity, but as holistic and valuable human beings with multidimensional identities and stories of both struggle and resilience.

McKinney-Vento school liaisons are mandated by law to serve as resources in public school systems for students experiencing homelessness. These liaisons may have early opportunities to refer families to critical services, such as mental health, health, substance abuse, and housing support. These systems must also increase their competencies in serving families with LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. LGBTQ-focused tools and resources, such as those made available by the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) for educators, school administrators, parents, guardians, family members, youth, and supporters are a good starting point. Next steps would include evaluating these and other LGBTQ resources for effectiveness and refinement.

At the federal policy level, the Basic Center Program commonly serves as an entry point for minors who need space to allow tensions at home to subside. Within HHS, Federal Youth Service Bureau (FYSB) guidance and technical assistance can partner with those of the CDC and SAMHSA to offer tools through Basic Center Programs and other services that engage parents, siblings, parents' significant others, and extended family members prior to, or during, the process of an LGBTQ youth returning home. There are unique traumas related to each relationship that can have profound effects on the young person. Program developers and technical assistance providers should also be mindful of the need for interventions specifically geared toward, or adapted for, LGBTQ youth and their extended families.

#### **Finding 4. Safe, affirming responses and services are important for engaging LGBTQ youth**

**Offering services is not enough for young people to access them; young people judge an agency's reputation before engaging.**

Even young people in crisis have options and personal agency to choose among them. Our research showed that young people's identity as LGBTQ was not the only lens through which they made decisions about engaging services, but it was often an important one.

As the findings highlight, most LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness have withstood discrimination, bullying, exploitation, and/or violence in their grueling journeys into and through homelessness. Against these life backdrops, LGBTQ youth are often hesitant to



take added risks by engaging services that are not demonstrably safe and affirming for young people like them. Youth most often learned about these risks from their own experiences as well as from other youth who had direct experience with a particular service system or provider agency. They often calculated their decision to engage with an agency against the risks of staying on the streets or getting by without formal supports.

Consider Jess's experience as a transgender young woman navigating services. "Having appropriate mental health care is so important," she believed, but she also described barriers to treatment. "There are so many therapists out there that are not educated at all on LGBT issues, and, even if they are a little bit, when it comes to trans or, like, gender identity-related issues, they're very, very, very uneducated. Um,

and that's coming from me and basically every single other trans person that I know and I've talked to have had negative encounters with therapists or psychologists or psychiatrists."

**Young people want to be accepted and seen not simply for their sexual or gender identity, but as holistic and valuable human beings with multidimensional identities and stories of both struggle and resilience.** As one youth, Dan, noted, the resources would be better "if the community was a lot more accepting—not just with like accepting as in like with my kind of people, like, LGBT—but accepting as in just, you know, with people who are struggling with like, for instance, drug issues or just abusive parents or homelessness." Young people in the study needed to feel nurtured and affirmed for their LGBTQ identities, but this was not the whole of how

they understood themselves or the sole extent of their needs for support or resources. Overall, LGBTQ youth preferred engaging in services that recognized and reinforced their strengths and personal agency.

### ***Implications and Recommendations***

**Our efforts need to go many steps farther than advocating the simple inclusion of minority and stigmatized youth into mainstream programs and services.** CoCs, as well as technical assistance providers, can take a first step by facilitating peer-to-peer learning and listening groups with LGBTQ youth to learn how to create more welcoming, nurturing, safe, and trusted service options. CoCs and youth providers can facilitate youth-led efforts to gather information on what elements contribute to a "trustworthy" program.

The National Youth Forum on Homelessness and the True Colors Fund have published a [youth collaboration toolkit](#) that provides practical, youth-led guidance on conducting listening sessions with youth and engaging them meaningfully in programs and systems.

**More purposeful evaluation of the most promising interventions around youth homelessness, and their effectiveness specifically for LGBTQ young people, is critical for government agencies and foundations that make investments in this area.** The federal government can take the lead by providing evaluation funding for core service programs, including, but not limited to, transitional living programs, rapid rehousing, permanent supportive housing, host homes, family interventions, case management, mental health services, and employment interventions. For example, the kind of policy reflected by the federal Foster Care Independence Act, which requires that funding be set aside for evaluations of promising independent living programs, can be replicated across other systems that impact the lives of youth experiencing homelessness, with attention to specific subpopulations like LGBTQ youth.

## CONCLUSION

**In the face of serious adversity, many LGBTQ young people showed remarkable resilience.** Based on the severe challenges that young LGBTQ people face because of homelessness, it would be easy to assume that they are downtrodden and demoralized. Yet, this narrative did not fit most of the youth we heard from. For instance, Jamal, a 21-year-old black gay man in Philadelphia, shared experiences of being cut off and disgraced by family members for being gay, as well as enduring abuse, bouts of couch surfing, and sleeping in shelters. Despite these obstacles, with support from a transitional living program, Jamal found a job suited to his love of helping others: he assists people with disabilities and special needs. Jamal offered strong insights to other youth who might face similar struggles, a testament to his positive outlook and resilience. “[R]egardless of anything that

may come your way, you still have the ability to fight it. Like whether it's with help by yourself, with friends, family, coworkers... know that there's someone out there. So you're never in this world alone by yourself going through just one thing by yourself... never give up trying to make a better you.” Jamal's reflection emphasizes the need to create, sustain, and provide access to services that can help LGBTQ youth and their families build on their strengths and overcome their hardships.

*Missed Opportunities: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America* offers unprecedented national insights from different research methods and perspectives into the scale and circumstances of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. From Isabel to Dan to Joe to Jess to Jamal—no two youth experiences were exactly alike, including how and when their LGBTQ identity influenced their homeless experience. Part of what is required to serve this subpopulation effectively is for policies, systems, and programs to respond to this diversity through individual assessment and well-tailored service delivery, in partnership with the young people being served.

Key findings and common themes emerged that demand collective action. Many LGBTQ youths' trajectories into homelessness revealed numerous opportunities for prevention and early intervention. This insight should encourage policymakers and advocates who serve youth to jumpstart work on early identification of youth at risk for homelessness. Early identification can create better opportunities for initiating appropriate supports before family situations escalate into a crisis. Leaders in homelessness systems and services also need to act on the importance of earning reputations as safe and affirming spaces—for all young people but especially for LGBTQ youth, who have shown they will avoid service agencies they don't trust.

Together, we can end youth homelessness in America. And we can get there faster by centering action and actionable research on LGBTQ youth and other high-risk subpopulations that experience homelessness at much higher levels. We owe it to young people like Isabel, and we owe it to our nation's future.

## GLOSSARY

**Continuum of Care (COC):** A regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals

**Couch surfing:** Moving from one temporary living arrangement to another without a secure place to live. While some definitions consider staying with others as homelessness, others place this under a broader concept of “housing instability.” We include couch surfing in overall estimates of homelessness but also provide estimates that separate out couch surfing-only experiences where people did not also report “homelessness.”

**Explicit homelessness:** This refers to survey respondents who used the term “homeless” to describe youth experiences. For 13- to 17-year-olds, it also includes reports of having run away from home, or having been kicked out, and staying somewhere else for at least one night.

**Homelessness:** Generally refers to experiences of sleeping in places not meant for living, staying in shelters, or temporarily staying with others (“couch surfing”) while lacking a safe and stable alternative living arrangement. Voices of Youth Count looks at unaccompanied homelessness, meaning the youth is unaccompanied by a parent or guardian while homeless.

**LGBTQ:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. While there is overlap in the experiences of youth who identify as sexual minorities and those who identify as transgender (and most of the transgender youth we surveyed also identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual), each category also involves distinct identities and experiences.

**Sexual orientation:** A person's sexual identity stated in relation to the gender to which they are attracted; the fact of being heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual.

**Transgender:** The term transgender refers to people whose gender identity (the sense of gender that every person knows inside) or gender expression is different from their sex at birth.

**Youth:** Varying age ranges are used for youth. The most common internationally is 15-24. We use the age range of 13-25 to align with the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act age range for national estimates, but we refer to two specific subgroups: adolescent minors (ages 13-17) and young adults (18-25).

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*Missed Opportunities: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America* highlights research on the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) young people facing homelessness in America.

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**Voices of Youth Count** is an unprecedented policy research initiative to understand, address and prevent youth homelessness in America. Infused with youth voices and strengthened by reach into nearly 30,000 U.S. households nationally and 22 diverse communities, the research provides robust information to support effective policies, practices, and programs that will end youth homelessness. More information can be found online at [voicesofyouthcount.org](http://voicesofyouthcount.org).