



Spring 2023

POLICY BRIEF

LGBTQ+ YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is a major public health crisis facing millions of youths across the United States. As many as 3.5 million young adults ages 18 to 25 experience homelessness in the US annually.¹

Unfortunately, there are more youth experiencing homelessness than there are resources available. Up to 40% of youth experiencing homelessness identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+).² They are also disproportionately youth of color.²

Homelessness is often the result of multiple risk factors ranging from individual conditions to socio-economic structures and environmental circumstances, including:

- economic circumstances like poverty and housing insecurity;
- systemic racism, discrimination, and violence;
- mental health and substance use disorders;
- and involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Family rejection seems to be the most common cause of homelessness for LGBTQ+ youth. Rejected by their families because of their sexual orientation or gender identity LGBTQ+ youth are often forced to leave their homes.³

Moreover, family rejection has been linked to increased depression, suicidality, and substance use among LGBTQ+ youth.⁴

LGBTQ+ youth are less likely to stay in a shelter and more likely to sleep in public or at the home of a stranger than their straight, cisgender peers. Life on the streets is dangerous for all young people; however, LGBTQ+ young adults experiencing homelessness are more likely to be victims of physical or sexual assault and are more likely to exchange sex for money, food, or a place to stay than their straight, cisgender peers. Investing in a young person's life enables them to avoid chronic homelessness, intergenerational poverty cycles, and pervasive trauma.

Programs designed to keep children and youth off the streets, such as Foster care, health centers, and other youth-serving institutions, are often ill-prepared or unsafe for LGBTQ+ due to institutional prejudice, lack of provider and foster parent training, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ youth by adults and peers.

LGBTQ+ youth are 120% more likely to be homeless than cisgender and heterosexual peers.⁵

ABOUT YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT HOMELESSNESS

Youth homelessness is a public health challenge. Youth experiencing homelessness between the ages of 18 through 25 are at a pivotal point in their development as they are expected to begin taking the financial and social steps necessary to transition from dependent to independent living. Unfortunately, because young adults experiencing homelessness (YAEH) often lack familial or financial resources, they struggle to navigate this transition, and many continue to experience homelessness as adults.⁶

Currently, there is no single federal definition of homelessness. Instead, the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education, and Department of Housing and Urban Development each use a different definition. HUD, for example, implements the narrowest definition of homelessness, excluding those youth at particular risk of being drawn into a cycle of long-term homelessness.

For this report, we define homelessness as people living on the streets, in emergency shelters, or temporary accommodations, for example, couch surfing, a vehicle, and squatting.

Home is more than a physical space; it is a place that provides roots, identity, security, and a sense of belonging and emotional well-being.⁷ Homelessness devastates youth and young adults' physical, behavioral, and psychosocial health. The longer young people experience homelessness, the more they are exposed to the risks of sexual and economic exploitation, and the more likely they are to experience trauma, declining health, and addictions. These negative impacts on a youth's health make it even more difficult for them to exit homelessness.

Homelessness, housing instability, and early childhood traumas, including family breakdowns, discrimination, and poverty, have long-term consequences, including:

- Increased risk of exploitation, violence, victimization, and physical and sexual abuse
- Greater involvement with the police and the court system.
- Disengagement from school and difficulty obtaining employment.
- Stress, depression, anxiety disorders, and suicide.
- Increased use of substances to cope

CRIMINALIZATION OF LGBTQ+ YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

LGBTQ+ youth face higher rates of detention and incarceration, which are detrimental to young people's physical and mental health, relationships, and social and economic prospects. Research shows that gay and transgender youth entering the juvenile justice system are twice as likely to have experienced family conflict, child abuse, and homelessness as other youth.⁸

A 2015 study shows that 20% of all youth in the juvenile justice system identify as LGBTQ+, even though LGBTQ+ youth compose only 5 to 7% of the total U.S. population.⁸ Legal system involved youth are subjected

to discrimination by public housing authorities leading to homelessness and housing instability.

Criminal records can also negatively affect an individual's access to benefits, education, and employment. **This is an added layer of discrimination on top of the discrimination that LGBTQ+ people face when trying to access safe housing. This discrimination is based on their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.**



RECOMMENDATIONS

REIMAGINING SHELTER SERVICES

One immediate action that housing providers can take to support LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness is ensuring that all shelters, housing facilities, and other youth-serving programs provide culturally competent welcome and affirming services to LGBTQ+ youth. Research has shown the need for ongoing training on LGBTQ+ identities for housing program staff and implementation of LGBTQ+ affirming policies to protect and treat people equitably based on their self-identified gender.⁹ These include housing youth where they want to be housed and providing safety and specialized care for LGBTQ+ youth.⁹ In addition, service providers should consider developing programming to help young adults develop and maintain positive coping techniques and help them maintain a sense of motivation by regularly asking them about their goals. Finally, youth homelessness service providers can establish mentoring programs with LGBTQ+ adults to provide LGBTQ+ youth with support and affirmation they may not receive from their families.

REAUTHORIZE THE RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH ACT (RHYA)

The Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act (RHYTPA) would update the existing Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), which has been the primary federal program addressing youth and young adult homelessness for more than 45 years.¹⁰

Administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, RHYA programs prevent trafficking, identify survivors, and provide housing and services to runaway, homeless, and disconnected youth. RHYA has been a necessary bridge for our youth. Still, more recently, these vital programs have worked to meet the unprecedented need for safe and stable housing and supportive services for youth at risk of entering or exiting juvenile justice or child welfare systems. **Unfortunately, RHYA has been chronically underfunded since its inception, despite these programs costing less than other systems that many youths experiencing homelessness encounter.**

YOUTH CENTRIC RAPID REHOUSING (RRH) PROGRAMS

There is no question that rapid rehousing (RRH) for LGBTQ+ youth should be expanded due its success. Research has found that 85% of youth are still in stable housing one year after exiting a rapid rehousing program.¹¹ RRH is an intervention that prioritizes providing stable, permanent housing, ideally within 30

days of housing loss or instability. RRH provides young people ages 18-24 subsidized rent for up to 2 years, leases in their names, wrap-around services, and case management tools to deepen and expand independent life skills. RRH is a program funded through Continuum of Care grants administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Significant expansion of funding for RRH should be expanded to support the ever-growing need.

THE EQUALITY ACT

The Supreme Court's decision to protect LGBTQ people from discrimination under federal law is a significant step forward. However, critical gaps in our nondiscrimination laws still need to be addressed. LGBTQ+ Americans lack basic legal protections in states nationwide, highlighting the need for comprehensive and inclusive legislation.

The Equality Act is crucial in safeguarding the rights of every LGBTQ+ American. It offers comprehensive protections against discrimination in areas such as public accommodations, access to credit, education, federal funding, housing, and the jury system.¹² The Equality Act would prohibit federally assisted programs from discriminating against people based on sexual identity or sexual orientation. Consequently, it would be illegal for child welfare agencies to discriminate against LGBTQ foster youth. Discrimination can include bullying, harassment, and denial of services.

The House of Representatives made history on May 17, 2019, when they passed the Equality Act. This landmark bill seeks to add sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity to the protected categories from discrimination in Titles II and VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.¹³ The Act has twice passed the House of Representatives in previous sessions of Congress but has yet to come up for a vote in the Senate.



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- 3 The Trevor Project. Homelessness and Housing Instability Among LGBTQ Youth. The Trevor Project. Published February 3, 2022. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/homelessness-and-housing-instability-among-lgbtq-youth-feb-2022/>
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- 5 Ormiston CK. LGBTQ Youth Homelessness: Why We Need to Protect Our LGBTQ Youth. *LGBT Health*. 2022;9(4). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2021.0324>
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- 10 National Network for Youth. A PRESIDENTIAL AGENDA for SOLVING YOUTH and YOUNG ADULT HOMELESSNESS in AMERICA 2 about the NATIONAL NETWORK for YOUTH (NN4Y). <https://nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/NN4Y-Presidential-Agenda-for-Solving-Youth-and-Young-Adult-Homelessness-1.pdf>
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- 12 Alberth J. LGBTQ Youth Homelessness and Discrimination in the Foster Care System. Published 2021. <https://patientpartnerships.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1237/2021/02/AlberthFinal.pdf>
- 13 GLAAD. President Biden Delivers LGBTQ-Inclusive State of the Union Address, Including a Call To Pass the Equality Act. GLAAD. Published February 8, 2023. <https://www.glaad.org/blog/2023-biden-SOTU>



The federal definition of homelessness determines which programs are eligible for federal funding and who may receive assistance. **Currently, no single federal definition of homelessness exists, and multiple definitions have resulted in YEH being undercounted and not prioritized.¹¹** As a result, homeless service providers turn away young people daily because their resources do not meet what is needed to support the enormous number of YEH.

Racial and social inequities, including discrimination and economic inequality, are reflected in the youth and young adult homeless population. Racism, poverty, and prejudice shape our social safety, which means that young people experiencing homelessness are more likely to be people of color or otherwise marginalized. We need to sharpen our focus on the inequities in our systems and implementation of programs and policies if we want to fully support our youth as they become adults.



AMERICA CAN AND SHOULD DO BETTER

For youth experiencing homelessness, the climb to adulthood can be particularly steep. Youth and young adults need support to find their footing. As young people in homeless situations become adults, they need to be plugged into networks of support that power their growth and success as they climb to adulthood.

TO LEARN MORE:

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