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# **LGBTQ Homeless Youth in Harlem: A Lack of Resources Despite Need**

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Despite only 10% of youth identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), 40% experience homelessness. The lack of services and resources available to the population in New York City have left up to 20,000 LGBTQ youth homeless. A plethora of reasons account for this, such as cultural and religious objections, a lack of resources from the government, and a lack of education about LGBTQ youth. Despite increased funding for and attention to LGBTQ homeless youth services, efforts have been largely inadequate. Therefore, it is necessary for increased involvement and attention from the general public and advocates to secure resources desperately needed.

*Keywords: LGBT, Youth, Homelessness, NYC, Shelter*

Young people who identify as LGBTQ face a much higher rate of bullying, discrimination, and violence compared to their heterosexual peers (Burwick, Oddo, Durso, Friend, & Gates, 2014); however, what may not be known is the disproportionate degree to which this population experiences homelessness. While less than 10% of the youth population identify as LGBTQ, about 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ (Cray, Miller, & Durst, 2013). Oliveira and Mullgrav (2010) reported that national estimates of total runaway and homeless youth range from 575,000 to 2.8 million, and the actual numbers may be unknown. According to Safe Horizon (n.d.), there are approximately 7,400 homeless people under the age of 25 in New York City, but these numbers are likely flawed, as exact numbers are often underestimated and difficult to determine.

It is important to understand that the disparities in these numbers may be due to varying definitions of homelessness according to different entities. For example, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services defines a homeless youth as under 21 years “who is in need of services and is without a place of shelter where supervision and care are available” (Oliveira & Mullgrav, 2010, p. 12). Alternatively, those who occupy roles as advocates and researchers often adopt broader definitions, especially with respect to age, such as “youth and young adults 13–24 years who lack family support and live in shelters, in the streets, or other places not intended for human habitation, such as cars or subways, or ‘couch-surfing’” (Oliveira & Mullgrav, 2010, p. 12).

According to the research, the most prevalent causes of LGBTQ youth homelessness are familial rejection, followed by physical, emotional or sexual abuse

(Burwick et al., 2014; Durso & Gates, 2012; Keuroghlian, Shtasel, & Bassuk, 2014). Additionally, family issues, including substance abuse, mental illness, or violence in the home, contribute significantly to rates of LGBTQ homeless youth (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015). Furthermore, Choi et al. (2015) found that transgender youth identified the lack of culturally-competent services as a reason why transgender youth homelessness exists at a higher rate than cisgender youth homelessness. This points to the disproportionate discrimination experienced by the transgender community, and their inability to receive adequate services and assistance.

## **LGBTQ Homeless Youth in New York City**

Although there are no studies reporting specifically on the Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan, NYC only had six shelters specializing in LGBTQ homeless youth in 2013—providing roughly 250 beds for the thousands of sexual minority youth (Vaas, 2013).

When a young homeless LGBTQ person is forced out of their home without money or support, they may end up in the streets or a shelter (Hunter, 2008). If they manage to get into a shelter, it is estimated that one-half are physically assaulted, and this abuse is severe at large emergency youth shelters housing hundreds (Hunter, 2008).

In Harlem, there is a shortage of resources for LGBTQ youth who are homeless. The neighborhood lacks a community center where individuals could access resources, education, and support (New York City, n.d.), therefore continuing to perpetuate the severe inadequacy of the community to care for its marginalized homeless LGBTQ youth population.

The Ali Forney Center, the largest organization in the country for homeless LGBTQ youth, relocated its drop-in center to Harlem to provide much needed resources to the nearby community. As of January 2015, the drop-in center became the first in the country to operate 24 hours a day, as weekend and overnight hours are when LGBTQ homeless youth are generally most vulnerable (The Ali Forney Center, 2016). The drop-in serves as the agency's central intake location, where youth participate in an assessment of their acute physical and mental health needs. It provides a safe place where LGBTQ youth can receive meals, showers, clothing, HIV support, mental health services, and case management—regardless of the day or time (The Ali Forney Center, 2016).

Overall, a lack of funding has been cited as the number one barrier to serving LGBTQ youth in non-LGBTQ specific agencies and shelters, followed by a lack of non-financial resources (e.g., community support) and a lack of training to address LGBTQ needs (Choi et al., 2015). Furthermore, a severe lack of education among non-LGBTQ-specific social service agencies across the United States has impacted not only LGBTQ homeless youth, but also the staff who are trying to provide services (Cray et al., 2013). Because the population is one that has been largely ignored and vilified, an understanding of the different types of issues faced by LGBTQ youth does not exist. A one-size-fits-all style of treatment cannot be applied to this population. According to Cray et al. (2013), 94% of providers of youth homeless services reported having worked with LGBT youth, but only 24% of the programs reported having LGBT-specific services. Therefore, a greater emphasis must be placed on understanding the unique experiences of this community, as well as the best practices for rehabilitation and support to assist.

It is clear that the LGBTQ homeless youth population is subject to an inordinate amount of discrimination. Existing efforts to combat the massive inequality and mistreatment of this population and provide necessary care and resources are severely inadequate, largely due to insufficient funding from the government (Choi et al., 2013; Cray et al., 2013).

Racism, heteronormativity, homophobia, and a significant lack of attention from local, city, state and federal government continue to create an untenable and unsustainable way of life for the LGBTQ homeless youth population (Cray et al., 2013). If the government is interested in prioritizing homeless youth—especially those who identify as LGBTQ—service providers must be better equipped to assess and address the needs of this vulnerable population. Therefore, while the power

lies in large part with government and other large donors to programs and services that help LGBTQ homeless youth, an equal amount of power lies with the general public to ensure that every LGBTQ homeless youth is provided with a safe and warm bed to sleep, where they can receive the care and assistance they need to improve their situation and build the life they want.

In New York City, more initiatives have been enacted through the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) to combat this issue. For example, according to NYC's Strategies to Prevent Homelessness report, in 2006, DYCD established a "continuum of care system" which includes drop-in centers located in each of the five boroughs, enhanced street outreach efforts and services, specialized residential services specifically for LGBTQ youth, sexually exploited youth and pregnant and parenting youth, and expanded shelter options (Oliveira & Mullgrav, 2010).

Conversely, the results from studies on the shelters and programs providing the care continue to include a lack of funding from the government, a lack of education and understanding of the LGBTQ youth population, a lack of adequate outreach initiatives, and most importantly, a lack of resources for the parents and families of LGBTQ youth (Choi et al., 2015; Oliveira & Mullgrav, 2010).

More effort and funding is needed to provide more adequate resources for the LGBTQ homeless youth community, including a greater capacity to provide outreach, education, shelter, and other services needed by the several thousand homeless LGBTQ youth in NYC. Increased visibility, mainstream and otherwise, has helped to start a dialogue around these issues, but not one that is big or comprehensive enough. This shortcoming is apparent based on the results from the numerous surveys taken by service providers who reported having a lack of training and sufficient cultural competence when working with this population (Choi et al., 2015; Cray et al., 2013). The Ali Forney Center still has to turn away at least 150–200 people every night, as there are simply not enough beds (Vaas, 2013). Carl Siciliano, Executive Director and founder of The Ali Forney Center, identified the biggest challenge as a lack of resources. In order to change the outcome, it does not suffice to continue to ignore the problem or assume the burden lies outside a governmental scope of work. Siciliano asserts:

If you leave them on the streets, they become addicted to drugs and infected with AIDS. They will become an enormous cost and burden to society.

Even if politicians look at it in terms of smart public policy and not in terms of human decency, it just doesn't make sense to leave kids out there on the streets. You're creating a social disaster by doing that (Vaas, 2013).

This makes clear, in no uncertain terms, that the cost of ignoring, stigmatizing and alienating an entire population of people has the potential to be detrimental to the well-being and progression of the general public. This public health issue continues to increase exponentially, as more people start to come out at an earlier age and find themselves without homes or support (Cray et al., 2013). The deteriorating domino effect of one losing their housing and financial means often leads to engagement in illicit and risky behaviors (Vaas, 2013). Unfortunately, many people feel disconnected from this issue, either because they are not a part of the LGBTQ community or they feel morally opposed to it. However, it is far less expensive to rehabilitate a young person and give them the opportunity to become a contributing member of society than to facilitate the creation of a generation of broken and forgotten people (Vaas, 2013).

Ultimately, the threat and experience of homelessness among LGBTQ youth, the physical, mental, and emotional violence experienced, and the lack of adequate resources to eradicate the issue is not a social problem that can simply be swept under the rug. It requires the education of a nation, the compassion of citizens (family friends and strangers alike), and the action and advocacy of an impassioned and determined public to create and enact social policy that addresses these issues. Advocacy must be at the forefront of the agendas across industries and professions, be it social work or business, as this is a public health issue that can and will affect us all, but most significantly, the LGBTQ youth who have been tossed aside.

So much more can be done, including research that challenges and addresses not only the core concerns of the population, but also best practices for addressing and mitigating the existence of homeless LGBTQ youth, and its prevalence in our communities across the country. The potential outcomes of simply providing human rights to those who have been denied are boundless. In a country that claims to be the land of opportunity, one must be afforded the right and possibility, without bias, to achieve their potential, regardless of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

LGBTQ homeless youth are in desperate need of protection and advocacy from the local to the federal level. Funding for LGBTQ-specific facilities and programs that address the specific needs and difficulties of

the community, trainings for service providers, family strengthening and social acceptance programming, and rigorous and continued research on the ways in which the population needs support are critical to combating homelessness among LGBTQ youth.

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