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# On the Streets

## The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth

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# Introduction and summary

Every child deserves a supportive and loving home. But for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children and youth, that home is not available.<sup>7</sup> Gay and transgender youth are disproportionately represented among homeless youth in our country, experiencing extreme rates of violence, discrimination, and poor health while homeless.

This is happening at least partly because gay and transgender people are coming out at younger ages as society becomes increasingly supportive of equality. Twenty years ago, most people started coming out in their 20s, well after most had left home and started working. If someone's family rejected them for being gay or transgender, it may have been emotionally painful, but the person could still likely take care of himself or herself.

Today, the usual coming out age is in the midteen years, when youth still depend on their families to meet their material needs and are particularly vulnerable if their family outright rejects them. For gay and transgender youth in these situations, family rejection can lead to a chain reaction of events that sends them cascading through social safety nets that are not equipped to support them.

Indeed, too many youth who come out are rejected by their families, harassed and victimized in schools, discriminated against in out-of-home care facilities, and brutalized in homeless shelters. They often resort to criminal activity, such as theft or "survival sex" in order to survive. The high rates of rejection, violence, and institutional discrimination combined with hostile school environments and social prejudice lead to an over-representation of gay and transgender youth among the homeless youth population.

The federal government can and should do more to respond to this problem. Of the approximately \$4.2 billion the government spends annually on homeless assistance programs, less than 5 percent of this funding, \$195 million, is allocated for homeless children and youth. Even less actually goes to serve unaccompanied homeless youth. Further, each year the federal government spends \$44 billion on rental assistance, public housing, and affordable housing programs, yet less than 1 percent of these funds, only \$44 million, is allocated for homeless youth housing assistance.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In this report the term gay is used as an umbrella term for all youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer.

There are currently no federal programs specifically designed to meet the needs of gay and transgender homeless youth, and there are no federal protections, and few state laws, in place to keep these youth from being discriminated against while accessing federally funded homeless services.

What's worse, federal grant awards for homeless youth services are being awarded to providers without mandating that they not discriminate based on sexual orientation and gender identity, leaving vulnerable youth open to harassment from staff and other residents. Nor are these grantees required to abide by basic standards of gay and transgender health care. In short, the lack of inclusive policies and targeted resources for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in federal grants prevents this population from having equal access to federally funded services.

The federal government can take several steps to reduce the incidence of gay and transgender youth homelessness and improve the services and treatment these youth receive if they do become homeless. Specifically, the Obama administration should:

- Strengthen families with gay and transgender children through evidence-based support services so youth do not become homeless. The Administration for Children and Families should develop programs that help families from all communities support and nurture their gay and transgender children to promote positive development and connection to families and communities.
- Establish schools as a safe haven for all youth, including gay and transgender youth. The Department of Education should address the role of unsafe schools in promoting youth homelessness, and aggressively address school bullying. They should also take all possible steps to ensure that homeless youth are able to continue their education.
- Acknowledge and protect those youths who continue to fall through the cracks. The first step to do this is an executive order recognizing both lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender homeless youth and homeless youth in general as special-needs populations, and protecting them from discrimination by federal grantees.
- Take concrete steps to expand housing options for gay and transgender homeless youth through Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Housing and Urban Development programs.
- Initiate research in this area as gay and transgender youth homelessness, and the programs to address it, are not being adequately tracked or documented. Affirming data-collection methods for homeless gay and transgender youth should be established for all federal programs serving homeless youth. Programs to address homeless youth must be rigorously evaluated to understand what works.

Taken together, the five steps outlined above would create a coherent and consistent federal response to the crisis of gay and transgender homeless youth, which is critically needed at this time. As our nation's society becomes more supportive of gay and transgender issues and youth come out at earlier ages, the federal government must step up and respond to the needs of these youths.

This report offers a blueprint for approaching this work. In the pages that follow, we will examine gay and transgender youth homelessness against the backdrop of overall youth homelessness in America and show the extreme levels of discrimination and violence many gay and transgender youth face at home, in school, in youth and adult homeless shelters and on the streets. We will specifically examine the many failing safety nets for these youth, and then demonstrate why our recommendations, if implemented, would do much to help ensure that all youth have a chance at a happy and healthy future.

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