

Fast facts

The dire consequences of stigma and discrimination for gay* and transgender homeless youth

Homelessness disrupts a young person's normal development, often leading to issues in mental and physical health, educational attainment, and behavior. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth who are homeless must face these challenges on top of social stigma, discrimination, and frequently rejection by their families.¹ The failure of critical family and social safety nets to support these youth has catastrophic consequences on their economic stability, educational attainment, physical and mental health, economic future, and life expectancy.

Family rejection causing more suicide attempts among gay and transgender youth

Family rejection of gay and transgender youth often leads to attempted suicide. According to a 2009 study, gay youth who reported higher levels of family rejection in adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to have attempted suicide than their gay peers who did not experience family rejection. They were also 5.9 times as likely to have experienced depression, 3.4 times as likely to have used illicit drugs, and 3.4 times as likely to have had unprotected sex.²

Suicide becomes more of a danger when a gay and/or transgender youth becomes homeless. Sixty-two percent of gay and transgender homeless youth attempt suicide compared to 29 percent of their heterosexual homeless peers.³

Lower educational attainment for gay and transgender homeless youth

Once gay and transgender youth become homeless, barriers to free and appropriate education arise. Not only do gay and transgender homeless youth have to deal with the harassment and discrimination associated with being gay and/or transgender, but they are presented with new obstacles to overcome due to being homeless.⁴ Despite federal laws in place protecting homeless youth's right to public education, residency requirements, guardianship requirements, lack of transportation, and access to health and other records can still prevent homeless youth from receiving a free public education.⁵ Moreover, homelessness hampers academic achievement due to frequent school transfers, lack of quiet, safe places to study, and hunger.⁶

Due to these and other factors, both gay and transgender homeless youth and homeless youth on the whole are reported to have high dropout rates,⁷ with one 2008 New York study of homeless youth finding that half of their respondents were high school dropouts.⁸ Additionally,

The Ruth Ellis Center, an organization that exclusively serves gay and transgender homeless youth in Detroit, reported in 2006 that more than 60 percent of their high school age youth population had dropped out of school due to bullying or discrimination.⁹

These educational challenges can have ramifications throughout a youth's life. It is impossible to know how much potential is lost when a homeless youth struggles and drops out of high school. A strategic investment in these youth could yield savings when they are productive members of the future workforce.

Physical and sexual assault suffered by gay and transgender homeless youth

Without the protection of a family, homeless youth are at risk of physical abuse and sexual exploitation. Thirty-three percent of heterosexual homeless youth in Midwestern cities reported experiencing sexual victimization,¹⁰ and another study found that 26 percent of heterosexual youth were asked by someone on the street to exchange sex for money, food, drugs, shelter, or clothes.¹¹

Gay and transgender homeless youth are more frequently targeted for this kind of greater physical abuse and sexual exploitation. A full 58 percent of gay homeless youth in those Midwestern cities had been sexually victimized.¹² And 44 percent of homeless gay youth reported being approached to engage in sex in order to meet their basic needs.

Mental health risks for gay and transgender homeless youth

The instability of homelessness causes physical and emotional stress for homeless youth. When combined with the stigma of a gay and/or transgender identity, this stress can cause youth to experience mental illness. A 2004 study of homeless youth found that gay homeless youth were more likely to suffer from major depression than heterosexual homeless youth, and lesbian homeless youth were more likely to have post-traumatic-stress syndrome than heterosexual homeless young women.¹³

Depression and low self-respect can also lead youth to engage in risky behaviors, such as drug use or unsafe sex. A 2006 study found that 42 percent of gay homeless youth abuse alcohol compared to 27 percent of heterosexual youth.¹⁴ The study also found that injection-drug use is significantly more common for gay homeless youth than heterosexual homeless youth.¹⁵ Homeless gay and transgender youth also report higher rates of unprotected sex than heterosexual homeless youth,¹⁶ as well as higher rates of HIV infection than heterosexual youth.¹⁷

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