



# Supporting Gay and Transgender Youth Most in Need

## White House Conference Turns Spotlight on Housing and Homelessness Issues Impacting Gay and Transgender Population

Melissa Dunn and Jeff Krehely    March 2012

The White House today is hosting the LGBT Conference on Housing & Homelessness in Detroit, Michigan. The event is held in partnership with the [Ruth Ellis Center](#) and is the second in a series of conferences being held across the country to address the unique needs of gay and transgender Americans.<sup>1</sup>

The keynote speaker at today's event is Secretary Shaun Donovan of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. In January, HUD Secretary Donovan spoke at the [National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's](#) Creating Change conference in Baltimore, where he announced his department's new equal access rule, which will help reduce housing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Today's conference signals the Obama administration's ongoing commitment to advancing equality for gay and transgender people.

The administration's partnership with the Ruth Ellis Center helps draw much-needed attention to the huge and pervasive problem of gay and transgender youth homelessness in America. According to reports, between [5 percent and 7 percent](#) of all American youth are gay or transgender. These youth, however, comprise [7 percent to 40 percent](#) of all homeless youth in the United States. This disparity is being driven at least in part by the fact that gay and transgender youth are coming out at [younger](#) ages.

As our laws and culture become more inclusive and accepting of gay and transgender people, many more now come out in their [early to mid-teens](#), when they are much more dependent on their families and communities for support. Unfortunately, their families and communities might not be able to accept these youth and might be unable to give them the support and nurture they need.

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1    In this issue brief the term "gay" is used as an umbrella term for people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

This issue brief explains why gay and transgender youth too often end up on the streets, what happens to these youth once they are on the streets or in homeless shelters, and the steps that the federal government can take to help reduce the incidence and severity of this problem.

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## Why they're on the streets

As gay and transgender youth come out at younger ages, they face a lack of effective social safety nets both in the home and at school. At home gay and transgender youth often face high levels of family rejection. Such youth are significantly more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as using illicit drugs, having unprotected sex, and attempting suicide. They are also more likely to experience depression than their heterosexual and nontransgender peers. Many gay and transgender youth leave home to escape family rejection of their sexual orientation or gender identity or even the violence and abuse that sometimes stems from this rejection.

Youth who have it rough at home often cannot rely on their school as an escape from family rejection. At school 84 percent of gay and transgender students report being verbally harassed, 40 percent report being physically harassed, and 19 percent report being physically assaulted. Three in five gay students felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and nearly two in five transgender students felt unsafe because of their gender identity.

Even worse, gay and transgender students report astonishingly low levels of confidence in their schools. Nearly two-thirds of students who are harassed or assaulted did not report the incident to their schools' staff because they did not think the situation would improve, or they feared it might even get worse. In fact, one-third of bullied gay and transgender students that reported bullying to school administrators said the faculty did nothing to address the issue. They are right—teachers across the board report that they do not feel their gay and lesbian students are safe, but that bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity is so pervasive they are powerless to stop it.

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## Once they're on the streets

Many gay and transgender youth turn to the streets as an escape from unaccepting or abusive families or school climates. But this is most often a tragic mistake because the harsh conditions of school and home are often better than what youth experience on the streets. Gay and transgender homeless youth experience 7.4 more acts of sexual violence on the streets than their heterosexual and nontransgender homeless counterparts. They face twice the rate of sexual victimization and are more likely to be asked to exchange sex for money, food, or shelter.

With all of these conditions compounded, studies find homeless lesbian youth to be more at risk for post-traumatic stress syndrome, behavioral disorders, and substance abuse than their homeless heterosexual female counterparts. Likewise, the stress and subjection of being homeless makes gay youth more likely to have depressive episodes than their heterosexual homeless counterparts.

Transgender youth also face increased sexually related health risks on the streets. According to a report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, nearly half of all transgender homeless youth have engaged in survival sex, and many report engaging in unsafe behaviors that placed them at risk of becoming HIV positive.

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### Once they're in shelters

The conditions homeless gay and transgender youth face when they enter homeless shelters can be just as bleak and violent as their experiences on the streets. Gay and transgender youth are more likely than their heterosexual and nontransgender counterparts to be sexually and physically victimized in shelters. Gay youth are 10 times more likely to be sexually abused or experience staff sexual misconduct than their heterosexual counterparts. Transgender youth are at increased risk of physical abuse when forced to use showers of their birth gender. And a majority of professional staff at shelters and group homes report feeling that gay and transgender youth are not safe in these settings. Many homeless gay and transgender youth even find themselves in shelters that try to convert them or use “reparative therapies” to change their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Transgender youth face additional specific types of discrimination when they enter homeless shelters. They are often forced to use bathrooms and sleeping quarters of their birth gender, rather than the one they presently identify with or present themselves as. These policies put already-vulnerable transgender youth into potentially dangerous situations, where they can meet a violent response for their gender identity or gender nonconforming behaviors. This means that in some areas, the streets—not federally funded shelters—are often the safest option for transgender homeless youth.

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### What can and is being done

In order to reduce the disproportionate levels of homelessness among gay and transgender youth (and to help end youth homelessness more generally), concerted government action is needed. As of 2009 the federal government spends more than \$4.2 billion on housing assistance each year, for programs such as federally backed mortgages and more accessible low-income family housing. Of this, less than 5 percent (\$195 million) is specifically dedicated to combating youth homelessness. Consequently, of the 766,800 contacts with homeless youth that federally funded programs were successfully able to make in 2008, shelter beds were only available for 44,483 of them.

Some leaders in Washington, D.C., are considering a range of policy changes that, taken together, would do much to help reduce the magnitude and severity of gay and transgender youth homelessness. We highlight a few of these changes here.

## Federal policy

First, leaders in Congress introduced the Safe Schools Improvement Act and the Student Nondiscrimination Act in both houses of Congress earlier this session to help solve the very visible problem of bullying in schools. The acts create sexual orientation- and gender identity-protected classes in schools for the first time and lay out a national plan for quelling the recent surge of antigay bullying occurring in schools across our country.

The Safe Schools Improvement Act would require all public schools that receive federal funding to implement policies prohibiting harassment and bullying based on gender identity and sexual orientation. The proposed law would also establish a federal definition of bullying and discrimination. Furthermore, this legislation would encourage training about bullying and harassment for faculty and staff and would require that incidents of bullying and harassment be reported to the U.S. Department of Education.

The Student Nondiscrimination Act would extend existing student rights and protections to gay and transgender students. It would establish a comprehensive federal prohibition against discrimination and harassment based on a student's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity in public elementary and secondary schools across our country. Importantly, the legislation also protects students who associate with gay and transgender people, including students with parents and friends who are gay or transgender.

Together, both acts promote a positive school climate for all students, including those who are gay and transgender. If they become law, schools would likely become more of a safe haven for gay and transgender students, which would help students access the resources they need to stay off the streets.

Second, last month HUD announced a new equal access rule, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity in many of the federal agency's programs, including public housing and mortgage lending. The new rule means that if a homeless shelter receives HUD money, it will not be allowed to deny a youth shelter because of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. The rule, however, does not ensure that the youth will receive adequate care once he or she is admitted.

Thankfully, while many homeless shelters receive some funding from HUD, many of the services designed to help gay and transgender youth are actually funded through the federal government's Administration on Children, Youth and Families, which is under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. HHS now requires that

all organizations that receive HHS funding and that serve runaway and homeless youth must be equipped to serve gay and transgender youth. Health providers are also encouraged to increase their cultural competency of gay and transgender youth and the specific medical challenges they face. These changes have greatly expanded the inclusiveness of HHS’s programs and services and increased access to culturally competent care for gay and transgender youth.

Finally, in 2011 Sen. John Kerry (D-MA) introduced the Reconnecting Youth to Prevent Homelessness Act. The act seeks to “develop programs to improve family relationships and decrease homelessness for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth.” The act does so by creating programs that help parents increase acceptance of their gay or transgender children. Currently, independent programs such as the Family Acceptance Project work to address the challenges that gay and transgender youth face when they come out to their families. As the first bill to ever directly mention the needs of gay and transgender homeless youth, Sen. Kerry’s legislation—if passed—would go a long way toward addressing the disparities and challenges that these youth face.

### Shelters and best practices

Despite overall shortfalls, there are several organizations that work every day to serve homeless gay and transgender youth. Across our nation, shelters such as the Ali Forney Center in New York City, the Ruth Ellis Center just outside of Detroit, and the Center on Halsted in Chicago, Illinois, specifically focus on meeting the needs of gay and transgender homeless youth. They serve as safe spaces for these youth and provide them both emergency and long-term housing, along with other vital services.

Other national homelessness organizations boast guidelines and criteria to help shelters properly care for gay and transgender homeless youth. The National Alliance to End Homelessness published the “National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth,” which provides tangible advice for making any shelter more culturally competent and welcoming to gay and transgender youth. The Center for HIV Law and Policy’s “Teen SENSE: Model Sexual Health Care Standards for Youth in State Care” outlines provisions for making sure gay and transgender youths’ specific health needs are addressed while in state care.

Additionally, the National Runaway Switchboard, which serves the entire homeless youth population of the United States, specifically advertises services for gay and transgender youth. These include a partnership with Greyhound buses for free tickets home after a youth has run away and a message service that acts as an intermediary between runaway youth and their families when they are not ready to talk directly yet.

## Data collection

Most of what we know about gay and transgender youth—and the entire gay and transgender population—is based on a relatively small number of sample surveys or regional studies. Overall, there is a dearth of reliable and nationally representative data on this population. Developing high-quality datasets on the experiences and needs of gay and transgender Americans and their families is essential if federal, state, local, and nonprofit agencies are to competently serve them. Incomplete and inaccurate data minimizes our full understanding of the size and scope of the challenges these youth face—from the reasons they become homeless to their experiences once they do and how being homeless while young affects their lives as adults.

To help solve this data problem, HHS is working on a [Data Progression Plan](#) to develop sexual orientation and gender identity questions for its national surveys. Sexual orientation metrics are expected to be added to the National Health Interview Survey in 2013, and the development of an appropriate gender identity question is underway on a similar time frame.

Adding these questions to the [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System](#), which is a biennial survey of the nation's youth that is administered by the Centers for Disease Control, would be especially helpful to better understand and meet the needs of gay and transgender youth, including those at risk of homelessness. In addition to federal government-led data collection efforts, homeless shelters, food banks, and other service providers could start asking sexual orientation and gender identity questions on intake forms and making this data available to policy researchers and advocates.

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## Conclusion

Today's White House LGBT Conference on Housing & Homelessness is a reminder that gay and transgender youth homelessness continues to be a serious problem in our country. Gay and transgender youth make up a disproportionate amount of the total homeless youth population and face harsher conditions on the streets and in shelters than their heterosexual homeless peers.

To help these youth, federal policy changes need to address issues such as harassment in schools and family rejection and must prioritize culturally competent youth homeless shelters, which are necessary safe havens for youth already on the streets. The federal government should use all available means—including providing additional funding, testing innovative new programs around family acceptance, and expanding data collection efforts—to effectively address gay and transgender youth homelessness. A larger response to this problem will help give more gay and transgender youth a fair chance at having a safe, healthy, and rewarding life.

*Jeff Krehely is Vice President of LGBT Research and Communications at the Center for American Progress. Melissa Dunn is an LGBT Research and Communications intern.*