

The Unique Experiences of Homeless LGBTQ+ Adolescents

Within the USA's homeless population is a forgotten subsection-of-a-subsection: LGBTQ+ adolescents.

LGBTQ+

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Every night across the United States, thousands of LGBTQ+ teenagers and children are forced to seek refuge in an alleyway, an underpass, a street corner, or a shelter, rather than a bed at home. Daily marginalization through bullying at school, outdated societal norms, and unaccepting families are what drive so many runaway adolescents out of their homes. While only 7% of the US population identifies as LGBTQ+, a staggering 20 to 40% of

the nation's homeless youth population identifies as LGBTQ+ (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016). This disproportionate crisis goes unmapped and unfixed, while identities are erased and experiences left unspoken.

Is the silence by design?

CoC (Continuum of Care) operations across the nation are tied to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), who essentially provide community development assistance and affordable housing at the national level.

Recently, a group of students at the University of Mary Washington conducted a study of the Fredericksburg's CoC services (Public Sociology Students & Martin, 2024). The study revealed the fact that the FRCoC's homelessness data systems have been shown to blatantly overlook the presence of queer identities. Beyond an out-of-touch option for clients to select "transgender" as their gender identity, *data simply does not exist for LGBTQ+ homeless individuals.*

This discovery only became more concerning with the realization that this isn't unique to our area – there's no data for queer folks in any of these homelessness systems nationwide (2023 Annual Homeless Assessment Report, n.d.).

It's dehumanizing exclusion, cloaked in willful ignorance. The HUD does not impose any mandates for its CoC service providers to be collecting this data. It's a true example of systemic erasure, and an institutionalized decree of queer insignificance.

Unsurprisingly, shelters and transitional programs for homeless young people are known to be ill-equipped to deal with queer individuals (Cochran et al., 2002). Spaces are oftentimes overridden with homophobic and transphobic bullying, pride flags are nowhere to be found, and the staff members are wholly disconnected from these kids' experiences (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016). There are very few service providers who offer specialized counseling or gender-affirming healthcare.

The impacts of data gaps are predictably horrifying. LGBTQ+ adolescents face significantly higher rates of sexual exploitation, substance abuse, incarceration, complex mental illnesses, and suicidal ideation compared to their heterosexual/cisgender counterparts (Noell & Ochs, 2001) (Whitbeck et al., 2004).

While living in a culture that's predisposed to misunderstand them, LGBTQ+ adolescents learn from an early age also to fear the police, as they tend to over-police them and antagonize them with blatant homophobia & transphobia (McCandless, 2017). Many young people also know that police officers have the power to bring them "back home" – a

dangerous environment with unaccepting family who've chosen to antagonize their own kin (Rosario et al., 2011).

Every homeless and queer adolescent's story is defined by rejection from their families, society, peers, and the entire political system. To be LGBTQ+ is to risk your own safety nets. It isn't a secret that this is a particularly marginalized group of people, and data erasure within HMIS systems only perpetuates the society-scale alienation that drives kids and teens to the streets as their only safe place.

Change must be systemic. Change starts with the top-down understanding that identifying as LGBTQ+ makes a person equally deserving of respect, dignity, love, and care. Overhauling the sources of perpetually systemic bigotry are paramount. HMIS systems are just one place where we can start, via investing in socially-competent care models that intend to dismantle cis/heteronormative assumptions that continually persist throughout modern culture.

Only by uplifting those who are the most vulnerable will we, as progressives, be able to assist marginalized groups towards seizing their own liberation.

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