



A third of homeless youth are LGBT, report finds

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by Anthony Glassman

Two weeks after the Cleveland LGBT Center began intensive outreach to homeless youth, the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** and the National Coalition for the Homeless have released a report on the epidemic of homelessness among LGBT youth.

The most immediate information coming from the report, "An Epidemic of Homelessness," is that 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth nationally identify themselves as LGBT, at least two to four times the average of the general population.

"This report underscores what we've known for a long time," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the NGLTF, "there is an epidemic of homelessness among LGBT youth and the national response to it has been disgraceful."

"There are a multitude of reasons why these young people become homeless, but ultimately family conflict is the ultimate reason," said Nicholas Ray, the author of the report. "The crisis begins with family conflict and institutionalized homophobia."

The organizations presented a press conference announcing the release of the report on January 30. Among the speakers was Angelika Torres, a transgendered Latina 20-year-old who was kicked out of her home because she refused to present herself as male.

Also speaking was Dilo Cintrón, 25, who was homeless for five years after being shuttled from one relative to another between the Virgin Islands and New York City.

When he was outed by a teacher, his parents sent him to live with an uncle in New York, without telling him that his nephew was gay.

Among the problems facing LGBT homeless youth are an increase in mental health issues, including depression, loneliness, psychosomatic illness, withdrawal and delinquency.

"According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the fact that LGBT youth live in 'a society that discriminates against and stigmatizes homosexuals' makes them more vulnerable to mental health issues than heterosexual youth," the report's executive summary states. "This vulnerability is only magnified for LGBT youth who are homeless."

One of the consequences of those mental health issues is increased drug use.

"For example, in Minnesota, five separate statewide studies found that between 10 and 20 percent of homeless youth self-identify as chemically dependent. These risks are exacerbated for homeless youth identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual," the report states.

Homeless sexual minority youth also face victimization both from society at large and, often, from the very organizations that are supposed to be helping them.

A Canadian study noted that LGBT homeless youth were three times more likely to engage in “survival sex,” exchanging it for food, shelter, clothing, money, or drugs than their heterosexual, non-transgendered counterparts. The National Runaway Switchboard also found that LGBT youth are seven times more likely than their heterosexual homeless counterparts to be victims of crime.

Shelters are often dangerous places

Even when they seek help from social service agencies, however, not all LGBT youth are protected from being brutalized.

“For example,” the report states, “in New York City, more than 60 percent of beds for homeless youth are provided by Covenant House, a facility where LGBT youth report that they have been threatened, belittled and abused by staff and other youth because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.”

“At one residential placement facility in Michigan, LGBT teens, or those suspected of being LGBT, were forced to wear orange jumpsuits to alert staff and other residents,” the summary continues. “At another transitional housing placement, staff removed the bedroom door of an out gay youth, supposedly to ward off any homosexual behavior. The second bed in the room was left empty and other residents were warned that if they misbehaved, they would have to share the room with the ‘gay kid.’”

According to the report, “Many also said that the risks inherent to living in a space that was not protecting them made them think that they were better off having unsafe sex and contracting HIV, because they would then be eligible for specific housing funds reserved for HIV-positive homeless people.”

One of the problems, according to the agencies, is decreasing funding for homeless services and increasing funding for faith-based agencies, who are often antagonistic to LGBT youth.

“A number of faith-based providers oppose legal and social equality for LGBT people, which raises serious questions about whether LGBT homeless youth can access services in a safe and nurturing environment,” Ray wrote. “For example, an internal Salvation Army document obtained by the *Washington Post* in 2001 confirmed that ‘the White House had made a “firm commitment” to issue a regulation protecting religious charities from state and city efforts to prevent discrimination against gays in hiring and providing benefits.’ ”

Despite the bleakness of the overall report, the NGLTF and the NCH note five programs that could be models for outreach to LGBT homeless youth across the country. Two of them, Detroit’s Ruth Ellis Center and Ann Arbor’s Ozone House, are in Michigan, while Urban Peak in Denver, Green Chimneys in New York City and Waltham House in Massachusetts were also praised.

The document issues recommendations for helping the situation at the federal, state, local and service provider levels, including increasing funding for homeless youth services, developing a national estimate of homeless youth to aid in allocating resources, raising the minimum wage, dedicating specific shelter space to LGBT youth, expanding the availability of health insurance and requiring LGBT awareness training for licensed health and social service staff.

Ohio groups help LGBT homeless youth

While the report does not specifically mention Ohio, agencies here are concerned about the issue as well.

In addition to the Cleveland LGBT Center's new Metro Youth Outreach Program, a partnership with over 20 other organizations funded mainly by Cuyahoga County, Kaleidoscope Youth Coalition in Columbus has also been working with LGBT homeless youth.

"Here, we are very lucky to have a fantastic relationship with Huckleberry House, which is a crisis/runaway shelter for young people," said Kaleidoscope executive director Angie Wellman. "In addition, we are a partnering agency of Project Connect. It is a program funded by Columbus public schools designed to re-connect unaccompanied and homeless youth with the educational system."

"In November we participated in a 'concept mapping study' through the social work department of Ohio State University wherein housing issues were very much a part of what our youth identified as areas of need," Wellman continued. "Because we are open every day from after school until 9 pm, it has become very apparent to me that some of our youth don't really have anywhere else to be."

"For that matter, for many youth, finding a safe place is difficult. For LGBTQ youth, this can be especially true," she noted. "Advocacy is a big part of our role with the youth who utilize the Kaleidoscope Youth Center. We help the youth to become aware of what resources are available to them, and assist them in negotiating their way through the appropriate systems."