

Homeless LGBT Youths Often Face Violent Life on the Streets

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Six months ago, 15-year-old Drew said he would have described himself as an “ordinary teenager.”

“I lived with my parents in a nice house in a good neighborhood in upstate New York,” he said. “I got good grades at school, and my life was pretty great.”

The young teenager—who withheld his surname for safety reasons—now lives alone on the streets of the Upper West Side, forced to beg strangers for the few dollars he needs to buy food each day and routinely accepting money for sex.

“It all changed the night I tried to tell my parents I was gay,” he said. “My mom was pretty cool with it, but my dad just freaked out and started screaming. Then he started hitting me.”

“He’d never hit me before, never,” he sobbed, “but when I told him who I was, that I was gay, he just got so mad. He said he was going to kill me and I believed him, so I ran.”

After spending a few nights sleeping at a friend’s house, Drew returned home, hoping that things might have calmed down.

“I tried to open the door, but my key didn’t work any more. So I started knocking and eventually my dad came to the door and told me that I was no longer his son and he never wanted to see me again. He said if I ever tried to get in touch with him or my mom again he’d find me and kill me,” he explained.

Terrified and devastated at losing his family, Drew fled to New York City, where he hoped people might be more accepting of his sexuality. But since arriving five months ago, Drew estimates that he has been beaten up on average once a week—just for being gay.

“Mostly it’s other homeless people who do it,” he said. “They find out you’re gay, and then they wait for a chance to punish you. When I first got here I went to a shelter, but once the other kids found out I was gay they started teasing me and then one day they all ganged up on me and beat me up. We weren’t in the shelter at the time so the staff didn’t know, but now I’m too scared to go back or to try another shelter in case it happens again. I prefer to take my chances on the streets.”

Local youth workers claim that Drew’s experiences on the streets of New York are not uncommon.

Margo Hirsch, executive director of the Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services—an advocacy organization that works on behalf of runaway, homeless and street youth,—said that while young people who self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender often run away from home because they feel unsafe there, the reality of life on the streets is usually no better.

“The streets are an incredibly dangerous place for any young person to be living, but those who self-identify as GLBT are often even more vulnerable, and there are certainly cases we know of where individuals have been attacked on the streets or in shelters,” she said. “Obviously it’s something shelter directors try to guard against, but in the larger shelters there may be over 200 young people, and it becomes hard to monitor exactly what’s going on.”

In 2007, the Empire State Coalition conducted a local survey in which it found that almost a third of homeless young people in New York self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. **These findings closely mirror a similar study conducted nationally by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which estimates that between 20 percent and 40 percent of all homeless youth define themselves in this way.**

Nick Ray, Senior Policy Analyst at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said he believes part of the reason for these figures has to do with high levels of prejudice toward those who identify as LGBT that still exist in many areas of American society.

“Often when young people come out about their sexuality, they encounter a lot of prejudice,” Ray said. “Sometimes they may actually be thrown out of their homes, but even if they are not forced to leave, the prejudice they encounter at home or at school or elsewhere in their local community can often make them feel very unsafe to a point where they feel their only option is to run away.”

Drew echoed Ray’s sentiments about the dangers of the streets. “Things were really bad at home, but they are just as bad here,” Drew said. “Every night I’m too scared to go to sleep, because it leaves me very vulnerable, and I just don’t trust people any more.”

“I hate being on the streets, but I’m too scared to go back home or to a shelter, so I don’t really have much choice,” he added. “To many people I’m just invisible, and they don’t seem to notice me, but those who do either want to beat me up or they want me to have sex with them. I don’t know which is worse.”