

Insights

Into Housing and Community Development Policy



U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development | Office of Policy Development and Research

Homelessness Among LGBTQI+ Youth

Youth and young adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and more (LGBTQI+) are at greater risk of experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness during their lifetimes. LGBTQI+ youth¹ face unique challenges, vulnerabilities, and conditions that their cisgender peers do not share. Furthermore, existing services often fall short of meeting their immediate needs, accepting their identities, and providing comprehensive support.

Insufficient identification and data collection methods make it difficult to determine the extent of homelessness among LGBTQI+ youth accurately and to serve this population better. The 2023 Point-in-Time Countⁱⁱ estimates that approximately 34,700 unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 experienced homelessness during the past year, representing a 15-percent increase from 2022 (HUD, 2023).¹ Although LGBTQI+ youth account for less than 5 percent of unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 experiencing homelessness, they showed a sharper rise during the year, increasing by nearly 30 percent. It is important to note that these approximations likely underestimate the number of youth experiencing homelessness in the United States, providing a lower bound. Instead of accessing formal shelters, many young people use temporary sleeping arrangements like couch surfing, doubling up with friends, or paying to stay in motels. These temporary situations do not meet the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) definition of homelessness, and thus, these individuals are excluded from the official count (see Figure 1).²

Given the challenges of tracking or quantifying homelessness among LGBTQI+ youth, it is difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of their needs and how best to support them. This article will contribute to the limited knowledge on homelessness among LGBTQI+ youth by highlighting key findings from listening sessions led by leadership from HUD's Office of Community Planning and Development and its Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity across six locations: Prince George's County, Maryland; Atlanta, Georgia; Memphis, Tennessee; Dallas, Texas; New York City (NYC), New York; and Bozeman, Montana. From the winter of 2023 through the summer of 2024, HUD leadership met with LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness and their service providers to learn about the challenges and barriers LGBTQI+ youth face in accessing shelter and services and obtaining housing. This article provides a literature review and analyzes 2023 Point-in-Time Count estimates to illustrate better the context in which LGBTQI+ youth experience homelessness.

Figure 1. Four Categories of the Homeless Definition

1. **Literally Homeless:** Individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.
2. **Imminent Risk of Homelessness:** An individual or family who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence.
3. **Homelessness Under Other Federal Statutes:** Unaccompanied youth under 25 years of age, or families with Category 3 children and youth.
4. **Fleeing or Attempting to Flee Domestic Violence:** Any individual or family fleeing or attempting to flee, has no other residence, and lacks the resources to obtain permanent residence.

Source: (HUD). n.d.

¹ For this article, the term "youth" refers to individuals who may be identified as a youth or young adult.

ⁱⁱ The Point-in-Time Count is an annual count of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness during a singular night in January. LGBTQI+ are defined as those who were under the following categories: transgender, gender that is not singularly female or male, and gender questioning. For more information, please see <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/ahar/2023-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us.html>.

Literature Review

Estimating LGBTQI+ youth homelessness is further complicated by evolving data collection processes for capturing Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) information and youths' fear of disclosing this information.^{3,4} Because of this, research approximates a wide range (20 to 40 percent) of the total youth homeless population in the United States who identify as LGBTQI+.^{5,6,7} Furthermore, LGBTQI+ youth face a heightened risk, estimated at 120 percent, of experiencing homelessness compared with their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts.⁸ Although there are various pathways into homelessness, key drivers of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness include family instability and parental rejection. Additionally, social and economic conditions, such as poverty and lack of affordable housing, can contribute to family instability and increase housing insecurity.⁹ As a result, some youth may become homeless because their families become homeless.¹⁰ Youth may also become involved with child welfare systems because of

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maltreatment and subsequent interventions; housing instability is linked to abuse and neglect.¹¹ In particular, LGBTQI+ youth are overrepresented in child welfare systems, through which they are likely to experience multiple foster care placements.¹² LGBTQI+ youth aging out of foster care may enter homelessness by default, whereas other youth may run away from unfavorable housing placements and become homeless.

Similarly, family conflict contributes to youth homelessness, whereby youth may leave home because their familial situations become intolerable. Youth disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity may elicit or exacerbate family conflict to the extent that some LGBTQI+ youth choose to leave home or are forced to leave by their caregivers.¹³ Choi et al. (2015) found that a lack of family acceptance and support is one of the primary reasons LGBTQI+ youth enter homelessness, especially for transgender youth.¹⁴ LGBTQI+ youth may also experience permanency difficulties if foster care placements refuse to accept youths' identities.

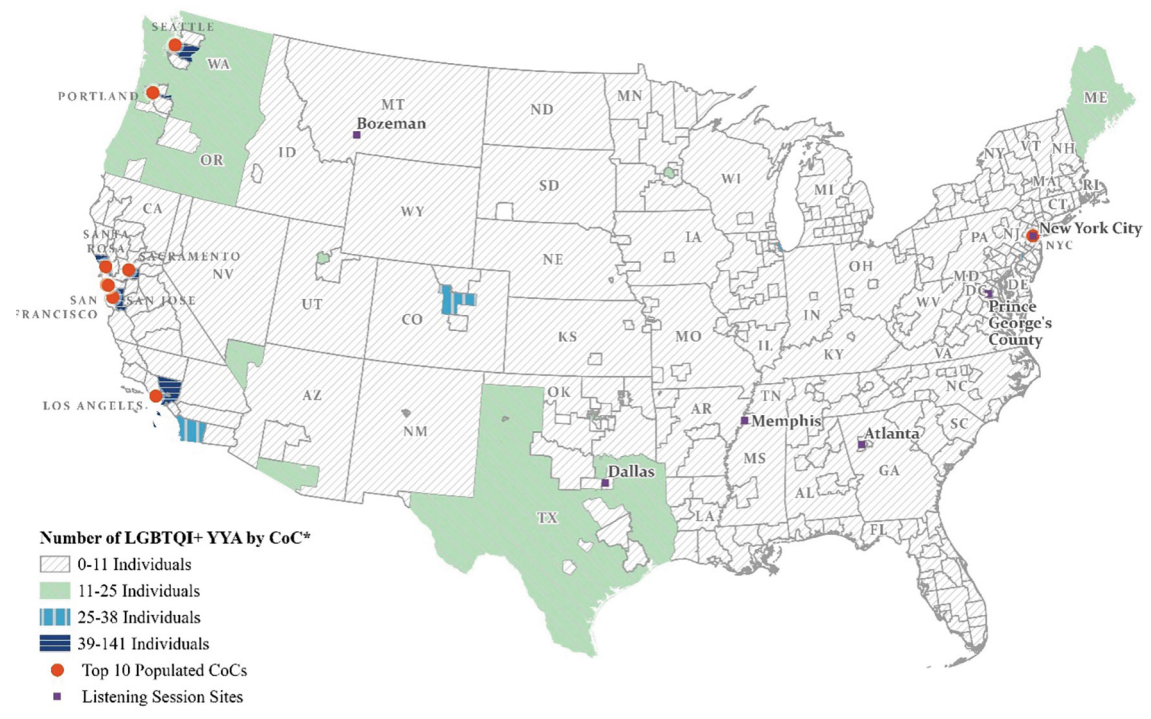
LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness are disparately susceptible to adverse events and outcomes. For example, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including survival sex and substance use, than their non-LGBTQI+ peers and are also more likely to be physically and sexually victimized or exploited.^{15,16} LGBTQI+ youth may also experience high rates of depression and suicidal ideation.¹⁷ In addition, LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness are vulnerable to various

LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness are vulnerable to various forms of discrimination, including unfair treatment in housing and employment contexts.

forms of discrimination, including unfair treatment in housing and employment contexts.¹⁸ LGBTQI+ youth with multiple marginalized identities, such as youth of color or youth with disabilities, may experience compounding discrimination. Transgender youth also experience specific discrimination, harassment, and trauma.¹⁹ Additionally, because of previous experiences with unfair treatment and violence and previous adverse encounters with adults, LGBTQI+ youth may avoid shelter spaces and other services.²⁰ Other barriers to shelter utilization include documentation requirements and restrictive shelter rules.²¹

Despite the growing awareness of the various challenges and needs faced by LGBTQI+ youth, who are housing insecure, homeless service response systems often lack the adequate infrastructure to effectively address these issues. There are various barriers to serving youth well, including funding restrictions, limited resources, and capacity issues.²²

Figure 2. Number of LGBTQI+ Youth and Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness by Continuum of Care, 2023



CoC = Continuum of Care. LGBTQI+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and more. YYA = youth and young adults.

Notes: The map shows the number of LGBTQI+ youth and young adults experiencing homelessness by CoCs in the United States as of January 2023. The orange circles identify the top 10 CoCs in terms of the total number of LGBTQI+ youth and young adults. The purple squares represent listening session sites.

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). 2023. "2007–2023 Point-in-Time Estimates by CoC." <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/ahar/2023-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us.html>.

Communities Work in Different Contexts

Similar to overall homelessness, LGBTQI+ youth who experience homelessness are concentrated in urban areas. Of the nearly 1,700 unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 experiencing homelessness in January 2023 who identify as LGBTQI+, more than two-thirds are in urban areas. Largely rural and suburban areas each account for roughly 15 percent. It is not surprising that LGBTQI+ youth experiencing

homelessness are drawn to urban areas. Various factors make cities appealing to LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness. Cities generally have a more diverse population, increasing the likelihood of meeting peers who may have similar backgrounds and experiences. In addition, cities tend to have more robust service infrastructure to serve and support vulnerable population groups,

such as LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness.

Figure 2 highlights that a large share of LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness are in coastal cities. In 2023, the top five Continuums of Care with the greatest population of LGBTQI+ youth were all urban areas known to be relatively LGBTQI+ friendly: NYC, New York; the city and

county of Los Angeles, California; San Francisco, California; the city and county of Sacramento, California, and Seattle and King County, Washington.ⁱⁱⁱ Among suburban areas, Salt Lake City and Salt Lake County, Utah; the cities of Tacoma and Lakewood and Pierce County, Washington; Grand Rapids, Wyoming; and Kent County, Michigan, have the largest population of LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness. Among rural areas, Washington Balance of State, Oregon Balance of State, and Maine statewide have the largest populations.

The six locations of the listening sessions were chosen to represent a range of geographies, populations, and services providing infrastructure.

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Atlanta, GA. Atlanta has a robust and mature service landscape, but the region faces growing challenges as the composition of the LGBTQI+ youth population changes and the demand for services rises. The growing number of transgender youths seeking services highlights the unique experience and needs of this population, and how service infrastructure is often ill equipped to serve them. High housing cost is a key concern for providers because they desire to develop more housing specific to youth.

Bozeman, MT. Bozeman's rural characteristics and policy environment strongly shape the landscape for organizations supporting LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness. Service providers indicated that they currently receive minimal state resources. They also perceive that the state is implementing more barriers to effectively serve LGBTQI+ youth, which makes offering and expressing support for this population increasingly difficult among providers and allies. Due to the wide geography, services are centrally operated. One large provider has a key role in serving vulnerable populations across various programs (e.g., housing, food security, early education, and transportation).

Dallas, TX. Dallas is developing its capacity to serve LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness. Providers demonstrated a high level of collaboration and described a wide range of efforts working with youth. However, limited funding and infrastructure reflect service gaps. Efforts to serve LGBTQI+ youth are often ad hoc without formal processes in place. Dallas covers a wide service region, including two major cities, Dallas and Fort Worth. Providers

described youth traveling from neighboring states and more rural areas to receive services they could not access elsewhere.

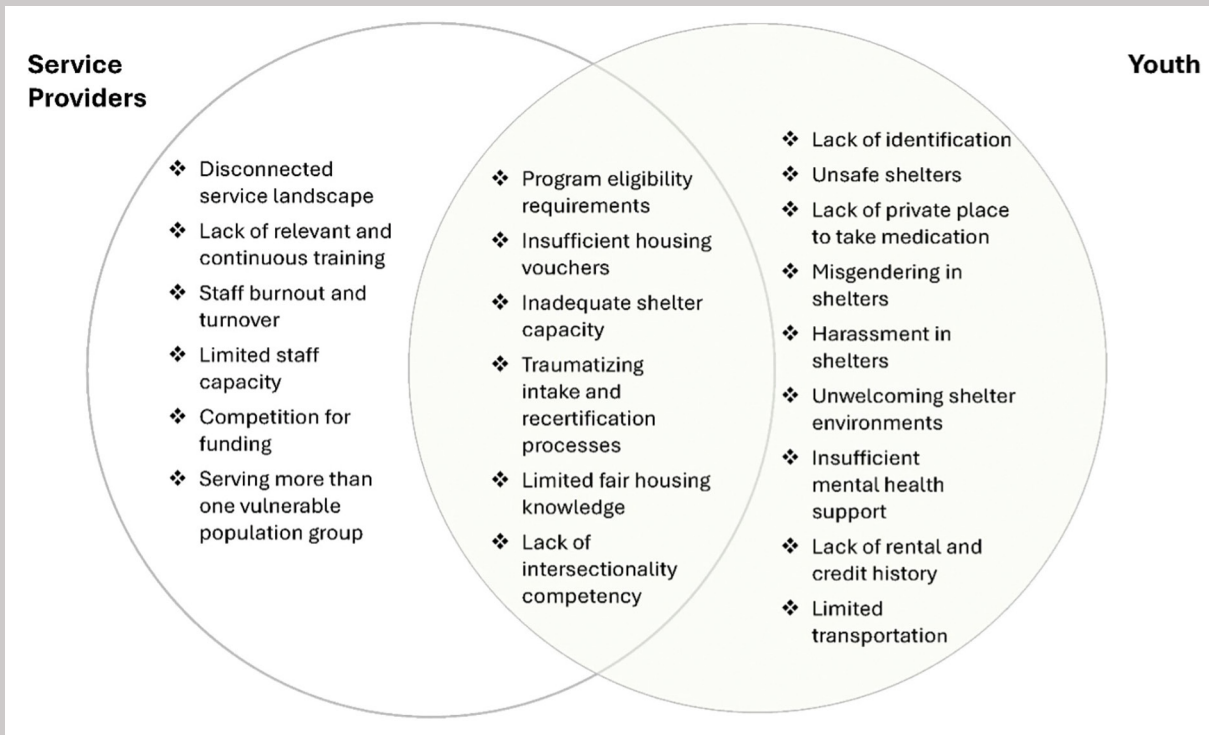
Memphis, TN. Memphis is a hub for LGBTQI+ youth in the surrounding tristate area who are seeking services. A large share of this region is rural with very limited services, and Memphis is known for having relatively more resources and specific programs that serve LGBTQI+ youth. However, as the central hub, participating providers shared that they are concerned about staff turnover and handling staff burnout.

New York, NY. As the largest city in the United States, NYC's size presents unique housing opportunities and challenges. For example, the city has well-established housing services and is embedded in a statewide network that disseminates key information about shelter bed availability, housing resources, and tenant rights. However, NYC's infrastructure is also very bureaucratic. Providers indicated that government agencies are often complex and operate as disconnected systems, sometimes offering conflicting guidance.

Prince George's County, MD. Prince George's County is a suburb of Washington, DC. Many service organizations exist, including various faith-based organizations and communities, but many do not offer affirming and inclusive services. Due to this limitation, many subgroups are excluded from services, such as undocumented and English language-learning youth, college students experiencing homelessness, and youth aging out of systems. Participants also identified a growing need to provide more upstream and nuanced interventions to families to prevent youth homelessness.

ⁱⁱⁱ A Continuum of Care (CoC) is a regional or local planning body that coordinates housing resources and services funding for families and individuals experiencing homelessness in their geographic area. For more information, review HUD's CoC program page: <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/>.

Figure 3. Challenges and Barriers



Source: Listening Session notes identifying common challenges and barriers which emerged within and across service providers and youth.

Challenges and Barriers

Participants across the listening sessions identified challenges and barriers that LGBTQI+ youth frequently face when trying to access housing and services. Although each participant and community brought a unique perspective, common and salient themes emerged. Figure 3 presents examples of challenges and barriers specific to service providers or youth and those challenges and barriers both groups identified in the listening sessions.

Strict funding requirements.

Grant-making entities, including the federal government, often have many rules outlining how money is spent. These provisions can limit funding flexibility

and hinder service providers' ability to direct money toward critical needs.²³ For example, participating service providers discussed how funds for obtaining housing were limited, with insufficient supply and long waiting lists. Even when youth are able to acquire housing, funds cannot typically be used for furniture and other items to help them acclimate to a new environment.

Program eligibility requirements. Strict criteria for services often limit who providers can support and discourage LGBTQI+ youth from seeking services.²⁴ For example, some programs are age restricted, have residency requirements, and are targeted

toward specific subgroups. Participating youth expressed frustration with needing to supply proof of identification when seeking housing or services. Often, they do not have this documentation readily available, and their situation makes it difficult to obtain the necessary requirements for government identification.

Housing discrimination. The interaction between homelessness and discrimination amplifies the challenges that LGBTQI+ youth face when seeking housing and services. Participants identified several incidences of discrimination. For example, a participant shared that they had been emailing about an apartment, but it was

suddenly no longer available when the landlord met them in person. Unfortunately, this population has experienced a lot of rejection and is not surprised when faced with discrimination.²⁵ They do not believe that systems will be able to address discrimination. Therefore, they just overlook instances of discrimination and move forward with their daily challenges.

Shelter systems are not always welcoming to youth. LGBTQI+ youth may be hesitant to use the shelter system because they feel unwelcomed and unsafe, especially shelter systems that are not designed to specifically serve youth or do not consider youths' particular needs.²⁶ Participants shared experiences in which other clients harassed them and they felt devalued by the staff.

Additionally, shelters are not typically set up to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ youth. They were primarily designed with cisgender individuals in mind. Shelters can be a sterile environment, lack privacy, and are often not equipped with refrigerators and other equipment for medication.

Promising Practices

Each community is doing its best to address the needs of LGBTQI+ within the landscape and resources that they face. During the listening sessions, participants were asked about best practices and suggestions on how to meet the needs of LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness better. The following are a subset of promising practices identified during the listening sessions:

- **Engaging LGBTQI+ youth with lived experience.** Research and practice have shown that meaningfully engaging those with lived experience is key to building and transforming service landscapes that are responsive to the needs of the target population.²⁷ Both service providers and youth participants value the engagement of which they have been a part. Participating service providers have provided several opportunities for engagement, including hiring youth with lived experience, developing internship programs, having youth representations in traditional boards, and forming youth advisory boards. Additionally, youth value these opportunities because they allow them to become part of a community, help their peers, and develop leadership, organizational, communication, and networking skills, which can be applied to other dimensions of life.

- **Strengthening connections between staff and youth.** When participating youth were asked about what made them continue going to a service provider, they specifically mentioned staff. They praised staff that can meet them where they are with empathy and care—for example, just listening with no judgement when they are having a hard day. Participating service providers also shared that youth positively respond when they are given autonomy, allowing them to have their own voice and speak for themselves. Building a strong, positive connection between staff and youth is conducive to youth continuing engagement with services that can help them achieve housing stability.²⁸

- **Improving and increasing relevant training for staff.** LGBTQI+ youth seek inclusive, affirming, culturally competent, and trauma informed care.^{29,30} Participating service providers see the value of high-quality training integrating these frameworks. However, some of the training is done on an ad-hoc basis, which makes it difficult to ensure all staff are properly trained. Although participating service providers discussed the training they had received, many youth still claimed that some staff do not appear trained to communicate and interact with LGBTQI+ youth. In addition to culturally

competent and trauma informed care, it would be helpful if staff was also trained to manage behavioral and medical health issues that are commonly associated with LGBTQI+ youth.

- **Providing wraparound services and aftercare to youth.** Stable housing is only one of many needs that afflicts LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness. Many LGBTQI+ youth have concurring issues, such as mental, behavioral, and physical health disorders.^{31,32} In addition, precarious housing situations disrupt education, requiring continued education and employment training support for this population.³³ Given their multifaceted needs, participating providers view a wraparound approach as the best service strategy to help LGBTQI+ youth experiencing homelessness. However, many service networks are not set up to provide an efficient wraparound intervention, with many providers working in silos and lacking bandwidth to expand and enhance collaborations.
- **Diversifying funding streams to allow for greater flexibility.** Given the unique needs of LGBTQI+ youth, service providers seek greater flexibility on how they can use and who they can serve with grant money. Funding from government

entities is limited and comes with specific rules and regulations, and application and award timelines do not always align with addressing immediate needs. Service providers have to be creative in diversifying funding streams, partnering with local businesses, and collaborating with other stakeholders to expand

their reach. For example, participating service providers identified a growing undocumented youth population. Some providers have turned to philanthropy and local communities to supplement funding because state and federal funds cannot be directed to serving this vulnerable population. Government funding

is complex and often not predictable. Therefore, the ability to “braid” or “blend” different funding streams is critical to filling service or resource gaps. Communities might also consider pooling or leveraging collective funding to maximize impact.

Concluding Remarks

There are various pathways to homelessness among youth, including family instability, housing affordability, and government systems involvement. LGBTQI+ youth may experience additional challenges related to their identity which may necessitate them leaving unsafe or hostile living environments, leading to a cycle of temporary housing situations or homelessness. Additionally, LGBTQI+ youth experience difficulties, including harassment and mistreatment, when navigating housing and shelter services. Incidences

of homelessness among youth have wide ranging short- and long-term effects, including education, employment, and health. Because LGBTQI+ youth are at a higher risk of experiencing housing instability at least once in their lifetime, specific efforts to prevent and mitigate homelessness with this population are critical.

These listening sessions highlighted that services need to expand and improve to serve and support LGBTQI+ youth attempting to obtain housing security better.

LGBTQI+ youth who experience housing insecurity and homelessness may encounter disjointed service networks, insensitive staff, and unwelcoming shelters. Plus, limited resources, inflexibilities, and bureaucracy impede dedicated staff committed to supporting LGBTQI+ youth. Even with the persistent and complex challenges characterizing this critical issue, the community has identified promising and best practices that can help stakeholders and decision-makers make progress in their goal to end homelessness among LGBTQI+ youth.

Endnotes

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