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C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 10

LGBTQ YOUTH IN CHILD WELFARE

BY TONY HYNES

LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the foster care system. Multiple empirical studies have demonstrated the prevalence of LGBTQ youth within the system, where they are represented at 1.5 to twice the rate they exist within the general population. They are also more likely to experience discrimination, family alienation, and sexual abuse than other foster youth. For adoptive parents and foster parents it is important to understand that the challenges LGBTQ youth in foster care face do not happen in a vacuum. Illuminating the challenges current and former LGBTQ foster youth face can be indicative of the changes that must be made to help both LGBTQ foster youth, adopted youth and LGBTQ youth in general.

Discrimination Against LGBTQ Youth in Child Welfare

LGBTQ youth in foster care generally have more nondiscrimination protections than LGBTQ prospective parents. Still, 13 states still lack explicit nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ foster youth. There are 37 states that provide protections for youth in the child welfare system through laws, regulations, or agency policies: 24 states and Washington, D.C., provide protections on the basis of both sexual orientation and gender identity, and 13 states provide protections on the basis of sexual orientation only.

Prevalence of Sexual Abuse

LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience consistent harassment and sexual abuse in foster care, juvenile justice settings and homeless shelters (which they often alternate in and out of). Findings show that, when compared with their heterosexual and cisgender peers, LGBTQ youth in the juvenile justice system are twice as likely to have experienced child abuse. At times, they're subjected to dangerous efforts to influence their orientation or gender identity. One such example is conversion therapy, a harmful practice designed to attempt to force LGBTQ identifying individuals to "change" their sexual orientation and/or identifying gender.

Treatment in Foster Care

In a common trend, the Los Angeles Foster Youth Study found that LGBTQ youth are more than twice as likely to live in a group home and have a higher average number of home placements. They also found that LGBTQ youth are twice as likely to report being treated poorly by the foster care system. Additionally, the percentage of LGBTQ foster youth who were hospitalized for emotional reasons (13.5%) was nearly triple the percentage of similar hospitalizations for non-LGBTQ youth (4.2%).

Homelessness in LGBTQ Youth

Without safe foster care placements, and without the vital support of caseworkers and other child welfare professionals, LGBTQ youth often flee abuse in foster care only to face homelessness and sexual exploitation. Studies have found that between 20 and 45 percent of all homeless youth identify as LGBTQ. () Being homeless is particularly dangerous for LGBTQ youth. During periods of homelessness, LGBTQ youth also face increased risk of physical harm. For example, The U.S. National Alliance to End Homelessness reports that LGBTQ homeless youth are roughly 7.4 times more likely to suffer acts of sexual violence than heterosexual homeless youth.



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LGBTQ Youth Overrepresented in Juvenile Justice System

LGBTQ young adults are also overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. While LGBTQ youth comprise only an estimated 5-7 percent of the overall youth population in the United States, they represent 13-15 percent of those currently in the juvenile justice system, many of whom are former foster youth.

Lack of Opportunities in Adolescence and Adulthood for LGBTQ Former Foster Youth

One study utilized data from the Multi Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs to compare outcomes of LGBTQ youth to their heterosexual peers. Deficits were found for LGBTQ youth in education, employment, homelessness and financial stability. LGBTQ youth were less likely than heterosexual youth to obtain a high school diploma (43% versus 63%). Additionally, identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual decreased youth's likelihood of being financially stable and of having work experience by over 50%. Foster youth traditionally face deficits in general in the aforementioned areas, making the disparity among LGBTQ foster youth especially troubling.

What Can Be Done to Help LGBTQ Foster Youth

To help reverse the negative trends facing LGBTQ foster youth, it is imperative that steps are taken to recruit LGBTQ and LGBTQ affirming foster and adoptive parents. Training parents and child welfare professionals on best practices in supporting LGBTQ youth is paramount. Equally important is the creation of specialized programs that create spaces for LGBTQ youth to express the unique challenges they face in affirming, constructive ways. Child welfare agencies should also create community connections that prioritize the importance of supporting LGBTQ and non-adopted LGBTQ youth in all regions of the country, an undertaking meant to decrease the amount of LGBTQ individuals experiencing negative experiences with their families, and potentially leading to a decrease in LGBTQ youth who seek or are placed in foster care.

Dettlaff et al., 2018)

Welcoming All Families - Center for American Progress

Ibid

Welcoming All Families - Center for American Progress

Ibid

Sexual and gender minority disproportionality and disparities in child welfare: A population-based study - ScienceDirect

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