



TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 10

LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN CHILD WELFARE

BY CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

Multiple studies have shown that LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in the foster care system, often due to abuse and rejection by their families and even discrimination in the system itself as well as society at large. Multiple empirical studies have demonstrated the prevalence of LGBTQ+ youth within the system, where they are represented at 1.5 to 2 times their rate in the general population.¹ LGBTQ+ children and youth are also more likely to experience discrimination, family alienation, and sexual abuse than other youth in care.

For child welfare leaders and 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 and are not the result of their identity.

CHALLENGES FACING LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN CHILD WELFARE

Lack of Protection

LGBTQ+ youth in foster care have more nondiscrimination protections than LGBTQ+ prospective parents. As of 2018, 13 states lacked explicit nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ+ youth in foster care. At the same time, 37 states provided protections for youth in the child welfare system through laws, regulations, or agency policies: 24 states and Washington, D.C., provided protections based on both sexual orientation and gender identity, and 13 states provided protections based on sexual orientation only.²

Prevalence of Sexual Abuse

LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience harassment and sexual abuse in foster care, juvenile justice settings, and homeless shelters. 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 are 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.

Poor Outcomes in Foster Care

The Los Angeles Foster Youth Study found that LGBTQ+ youth were more than twice as likely to live in a group home and had a higher average number of home placements. They also found that LGBTQ+ youth were twice as likely to report being treated poorly by the foster care system. The percentage of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care who were hospitalized for emotional reasons (13.5%) was nearly triple the percentage of similar

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hospitalizations for non-LGBTQ+ youth (4.2%).³

Homelessness in LGBTQ+ Youth

Without safe, affirming 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. Research has shown that more than half of LGBTQ youth in care had experienced homelessness due to not feeling safe in their group or foster home.⁴

Studies have found that between 20 and 45 percent of all homeless youth identify as LGBTQ.⁵ Being homeless is particularly dangerous for LGBTQ+ youth. During periods of homelessness, LGBTQ+ youth face increased risk of physical harm. For example, the National Coalition for the Homeless reports that LGBTQ+ homeless youth are roughly 7.4 times more likely to suffer acts of sexual violence than heterosexual homeless youth.⁶

Overrepresentation in Juvenile Justice

LGBTQ+ young adults are also overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. While LGBTQ+ youth comprise only about 5 to 7 percent of the overall youth population in the US, they represent 13 to 15 percent of those currently in the juvenile justice system. Many of these youth had previously been in foster care.⁷

Lack of Opportunities in Adolescence and Adulthood for LGBTQ+ Youth Who Were in Care

One study used data from the Multi Site Evaluation of Foster Youth Programs to compare outcomes of LGBTQ+ youth to their heterosexual peers. LGBTQ+ youth faced additional challenges in education, employment, homelessness, and financial stability:

- LGBTQ + youth were less likely than heterosexual youth to obtain a high school diploma (43% versus 63%).
- Identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual decreased youth's likelihood of being financially stable and of having work experience by more than 50%.⁸

Youth who have been in care already face challenges in these areas, making the difficulties facing LGBTQ+ youth who have been in care especially troubling.

WHAT WE CAN DO TO HELP

To help reverse the negative trends facing LGBTQ+ children and youth in foster care, it is imperative that child welfare agencies take the following steps:

- Advocate for laws and policies that prevent discrimination against LGBTQ children and youth in care and against current and prospective LGBTQ+ foster and adoptive parents.
- Actively recruit, retain, and support LGBTQ+ and LGTBQ+-affirming foster and adoptive parents.
- Train *all* current and prospective foster and adoptive parents and child welfare professionals on best practices in supporting LGBTQ+ children and youth.

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- Develop specialized programs that create spaces for LGBTQ+ youth to express the unique challenges they face in affirming, constructive ways.
- Create community connections that prioritize the importance of supporting LGBTQ+ children and 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.
- Develop programs to help support all forms of permanence for LGBTQ+ youth, including reunification, placement with kin, adoption, and guardianship.
- Foster and adoptive parents can ensure they are affirming of their children’s sexual orientation and gender identity, help children and youth connection with supportive LGBTQ+ role models, and join efforts to advocate for the systemic changes above.

RESOURCES

- [Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth: A Guide for Foster Parents](#)
- [Human Rights Campaign All Children – All Families Program](#)
- [Ensuring Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being for Transgender Youth](#)

Endnotes

- 1 Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth within in welfare: Prevalence, risk and outcomes, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol 80, June 2018 by Alan Dettlaff et al.; available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0145213418301133>
- 2 *Welcoming All Families*, Center for American Progress; available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/welcoming-all-families/>
- 3 Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Foster Care: Addressing disproportionality and disparity in Los Angeles, Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, 2014; available at <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/sgm-youth-la-foster-care/>
- 4 Mallon, 1998; cited in <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/lgbtq-youth/child-welfare>
- 5 Sullivan, Sommer, & Moff, 2001; Feinstein, Greenblatt, Hass, Kohn, & Rana, 2001; Durso & Gates, 2012; cited in <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/lgbtq-youth/child-welfare>
- 6 Homelessness Among the LGBTQ Community, National Coalition for the Homeless; available at <https://nationalhomeless.org/lgbtq-homelessness/>
- 7 LGBTQ Youth in the Foster System, Children's Rights, January 2023; available at <https://www.childrensrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CR-LGBTQ-Youth-in-Foster-Care-2023-Fact-Sheet.pdf>
- 8 Functional outcomes among sexual minority youth emancipating from the child welfare system, *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 61 (2016) by Svetlana Sphpiegel and Cassandra Simmel; available at <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1056&context=social-work-and-child-advocacy-facpubs>