

Serving LGBT Youth and Adult Populations

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LGBT POPULATIONS AND THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: A SNAPSHOT OF THE KNOWLEDGE BASE AND RESEARCH NEEDS

The social and legal environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the United States is changing rapidly. Despite these changes, existing research suggests that LGBT people, like some other minority groups, may face disproportionate risks to their economic and social well-being.

This brief summarizes the knowledge base and research needs related to LGBT people and child welfare programs. The brief address four topics: (1) the risk of child maltreatment for LGBT people, (2) the experiences of LGBT youth in child welfare programs, (3) the effectiveness of child welfare services for LGBT youth in foster care, and (4) the participation of LGBT adults in child welfare services as foster or adoptive parents. In general, research and data sources inclusive of LGBT populations are limited, and substantial knowledge gaps exist regarding LGBT people and child welfare programs.

THE RISK OF CHILD MALTREATMENT FOR LGBT PEOPLE

Analyses of data from surveys with population-based and purposive samples suggest that LGB people are at increased risk for experiencing child maltreatment compared to non-LGB people. (No research is available to identify child maltreatment risk for people who identify as transgender.) For example, a meta-analysis of 37 school-based studies of adolescents, found that sexual minority adolescents were 3.8 times more likely to experience childhood sexual abuse and 1.2 times more likely to be physically abused by a parent or guardian compared to their heterosexual peers.¹ In other studies using varied samples, LGB adults retrospectively reported significantly higher rates of childhood maltreatment and abuse than did non-LGB men and women.³ Additional research has found that high levels of gender nonconformity during childhood may increase risk for child maltreatment.⁴

The Los Angeles Foster Youth Survey found that LGBT youth experienced more instability in foster care placements than do their non-LGBT peers.²



OPRE Report #2015-24

Analyses of data from surveys with population-based and purposive samples suggest that LGB people are at increased risk for experiencing child maltreatment compared to non-LGB people.



Research needs.

Research on at least two topics is needed to expand understanding of the nature of child maltreatment risk among LGBT people:

Risk of maltreatment among subpopulations of young LGBT people. Future studies could examine whether risks differ by sexual orientation and gender identity, race or ethnicity, timing of sexual orientation development, or other individual characteristics.

Factors that increase or decrease risk of maltreatment for young LGBT people. Studies are needed to identify individual, family or community characteristics (such as family structure or community supportiveness for LGBT people) that affect risk for maltreatment.

EXPERIENCES OF LGBT YOUTH IN CHILD WELFARE

Two surveys of youth in foster care support the notion that LGBT youth are overrepresented in foster care. The Los Angeles Foster Youth Survey, a study involving a random sample of youth in foster care ages 12 to 21 in Los Angeles County, found that 13.4 percent of respondents were LGB or questioning and 5.6 percent were transgender.⁵ In the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (also known as the Midwest Study), which follows a sample of youth aging out of foster care in three states, 11 percent of participants were identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.⁶ Participants in various studies reported that LGBT youth experience harassment in group care; expressions of discomfort, insensitivity, or rejection by child welfare agency staff and foster parents; and feelings of isolation.⁷

Research needs.

Additional research is needed to fully understand the participation, experiences, and trajectories of LGBT youth in the child welfare system, including possible differences in experiences and outcomes between LGBT and non-LGBT youth. In particular, information is needed on:

The number and characteristics of LGBT youth in the child welfare system. Data on the demographics of LGBT youth in care will help child welfare agencies make informed decisions about services for these populations.

The safety and supportiveness of services for LGBT youth in foster care. Future research can examine whether and how the safety and supportiveness of care environments for LGBT youth differ by agency and location, type of

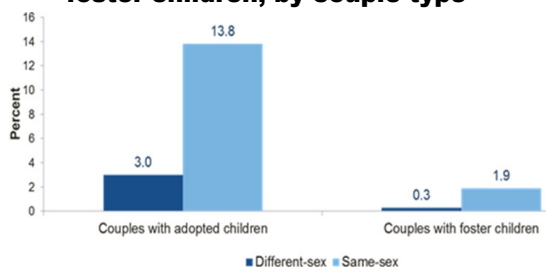
According to some child welfare providers and experts, a substantial number of young people in foster care identify as LGBT.

care, age of the youth, and other factors.

EFFECTIVENESS OF CHILD WELFARE SERVICES FOR LGBT YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Over the past two decades, child welfare researchers and practitioners have developed and published recommendations for ensuring safe, supportive, and appropriate services for LGBT youth in child welfare settings.⁸ Broadly speaking, recommended practices address four areas: (1) prohibiting discrimination against LGBT youth and ensuring they are respected, (2) increasing LGBT cultural competency among agency staff and foster parents, (3) providing child welfare services that address the specific needs of LGBT youth and their families, and (4) effectively managing information on the sexual orientation and gender identity of youth in the child welfare system.

Percentage of couples with adopted or foster children, by couple type



Source: Analyses of American Community Survey (2008–2011) by Gary J. Gates, Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law.

Research needs.

Further research is needed to understand whether and how agencies are taking steps to improve services to young LGBT people and to assess the results of these efforts. Future studies could examine:

The extent to which public child welfare agencies are taking steps to improve services for young LGBT people. More information is needed regarding the successes and challenges agencies experience in making these changes.

The implementation and effectiveness of interventions to enhance permanency outcomes for LGBT youth in care or young people at risk of child welfare involvement. These interventions might aim to identify LGBT-friendly foster or adoptive families or help biological and foster/adoptive families address conflict related to sexual orientation and gender identity and decrease rejecting behaviors.

PARTICIPATION OF LGBT ADULTS IN CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

The CB's 2011 information memorandum on LGBT youth in foster care notes that LGBT parents are a potential resource for child welfare agencies seeking to identify foster or adoptive families for children. In qualitative studies and surveys of purposive samples of lesbians and gay people, substantial minorities

Analyses of nationally representative, population-based survey data suggests that same-sex couples are more likely to be adoptive or foster parents than different-sex couples.



report challenges related to their sexual orientation in interactions with public child welfare agencies. These include legal insecurity due to state and local policies that may hinder adoption by same-sex couples and the possibility of prejudice or social stereotyping based on sexual orientation by agency staff and others involved in the foster care or adoption process.⁹

Research needs.

Additional research is needed to better understand how LGBT adults experience the child welfare system and strategies for better serving these populations. This research could explore:

The interactions of prospective LGBT foster and adoptive parents with public child welfare agencies. Research is needed to clarify barriers that LGBT individuals and couples perceive to becoming foster or adoptive parents through public agencies and how they experience specific elements of the foster and adoption placement process.

How effectively child welfare agencies are engaging LGBT adults as foster and adoptive parents. Little is known about the extent to which child welfare agencies have implemented practices intended to increase the accessibility and appropriateness of services for LGBT foster and adoptive parents and the results of these practices.

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LGBT YOUTH AND SERVICES TO SUPPORT THEM: A SNAPSHOT OF THE KNOWLEDGE BASE AND RESEARCH NEEDS



The social and legal environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the United States is changing rapidly. Despite these changes, existing research suggests that LGBT people, like some other minority groups, may face disproportionate risks to their economic and social well-being.

This brief summarizes the knowledge base and research needs related to two types of ACF-funded services that may be especially relevant to youth who are LGBT: assistance for runaway and homeless youth (RHY) and sexual health education for adolescents. The brief address three topics: (1) homelessness and sexual risk behavior among LGBT youth (and those who are questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity), (2) LGBT youths' service preferences and experiences in RHY or sexual health education programs, and (3) strategies for providing services effectively to LGBT youth. In general, research and data sources inclusive of LGBT populations are limited, and substantial knowledge gaps exist regarding human services for LGBT youth.

HOMELESSNESS AND SEXUAL RISK BEHAVIOR AMONG LGBT YOUTH

Homelessness. In six cities participating in YouthCount!—a federal interagency initiative that aims to develop new approaches to counting unaccompanied homeless youth—19 percent of homeless youth surveyed indicated they identify as LGB and 3 percent as questioning.¹ Across the six cities, the share of youth identifying as LGB ranged from 10 to 43 percent.

Respondents to a survey of a purposive sample of providers working with homeless youth estimated that LGBT youth made up 40 percent of their clientele, on average.²

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Research on youth homelessness strongly suggests that LGBT youth are overrepresented among runaway and homeless youth



Sexual risk behavior. Sexual minority youth face health disparities related to sexually transmitted infections and may be at higher risk than heterosexuals for unintended pregnancy. Analyses of population-based surveys of high school students in 13 states and school districts found higher prevalence of sexual risk behaviors among students who identified themselves as LGB and students who had sexual contact with both sexes compared to non-LGB students.³ (Prevalence of risk behaviors among transgender students is unknown because they were not identified in these surveys.) According to disease surveillance data, most new HIV infections among young people (ages 13 to 24) occur among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men.⁴

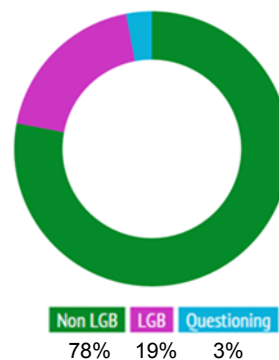
Relatively high rates of pregnancy involvement among sexual minority adolescents may be linked to risky sexual behavior in response to stigma, or to lower levels of protective factors, such as school or community connectedness, among these youth.

Research needs. The characteristics of the LGBT homeless youth population, the reasons that LGBT youth may face increased risk of homelessness and poor sexual health outcomes, and factors that may minimize these risks are not well understood. Future research should explore:

The size, composition, and needs of the LGBT homeless youth population. These studies could compare the characteristics and needs of LGBT homeless youth are similar to or different from their non-LGBT counterparts.

Factors that increase or reduce the risk of homelessness and poor sexual health among LGBT youth. Studies are needed to identify individual, family, and community characteristics (including policy environments) that affect the likelihood that LGBT youth will become homeless or engage in risky sexual behavior. Additional data are needed to examine risk among subpopulations of LGBT youth, including youth of color and transgender youth.

Self-Identification of Homeless Youth Surveyed by YouthCount!



Source: Mary Cunningham, "Homeless LGBTQ Youth."

Studies examining pregnancy involvement among LGB adolescents in the United States and Canada using population-based survey data found that LGB youth were 2 to 10 times likelier to become pregnant or cause a pregnancy than their non-LGB peers.⁴



LGBT YOUTHS' SERVICE EXPERIENCES

Service providers may find it difficult to collect information about the sexual orientation and gender identity of youth in their programs for many reasons—for example, youth may not have well-formed sexual identities or may be reticent to share this information out of fear of harassment, staff may lack the skills or protocols necessary to ask questions about sexual orientation or gender identity sensitively, or youth and staff may be concerned that the information will be disclosed to other agencies or parties without the youth's consent.⁵

Research on potential challenges to serving LGBT youth has highlighted issues related to negative social attitudes and the characteristics of available services. In a set of case studies of providers serving runaway and homeless youth, agency staff noted issues including the difficulty of overcoming community-level stigma, especially toward youth of color and transgender or gender nonconforming youth, and a lack of local resources that focus on LGBT youth.⁶ School-based sexual health education programs generally do not incorporate discussion of same-sex sexuality and health risks and thus may not address the specific concerns or circumstances of LGBT youth.⁷

Research needs. Additional research is needed to help policymakers and providers better understand the extent to which LGBT youth currently use ACF-funded services and the nature of access barriers that may exist. These studies should examine:

The number and characteristics of LGBT youth accessing RHY or sexual health education services. Research is also needed to assess how collection of administrative data on sexual orientation and gender identity can be improved in these programs.

Barriers to accessing RHY and sexual health education services. Future research on this topic could explore whether perceived barriers differ across locations and subpopulations of LGBT youth.

The service pathways of LGBT youth involved in multiple systems. Studies are needed to document how and why LGBT youth move across service systems—including the homelessness, juvenile justice, and child welfare systems—and whether their experiences differ from those of non-LGBT

Little information is currently available about the extent to which LGBT youth are accessing federally funded homelessness or sexual health education services.



youth.

STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING SERVICES EFFECTIVELY TO LGBT YOUTHS

A variety of authors and organizations, including government agencies, has offered recommendations for improving services for LGBTQ runaway and homeless youth. These recommendations emphasize prohibiting discrimination and ensuring the safety of sexual minority youth, increasing staff cultural competency, and addressing the unique shelter and service needs of LGBTQ youth.

To make sexual health education services more relevant to LGBTQ youth, researchers have recommended steps such as discussing sexual orientation and gender identity during classes, describing romantic relationships in terms that do not assume heterosexuality, and providing LGBT cultural competency training to instructors. The literature on effectiveness of sexual health education services for LGBT youth is very limited.

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LOW-INCOME LGBT POPULATIONS AND PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT SELF-SUFFICIENCY: A SNAPSHOT OF THE KNOWLEDGE BASE AND RESEARCH NEEDS

The social and legal environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the United States is changing rapidly. Despite these changes, existing research suggests that LGBT people, like some other minority groups, may face disproportionate risks to their economic and social well-being.

This brief summarizes the knowledge base and research needs related to low-income LGBT people and programs to support self-sufficiency. The brief addresses three topics: (1) the prevalence of poverty and economic vulnerability among LGBT populations; (2) LGBT populations' receipt of income supports, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); and (3) strategies for providing employment assistance effectively to LGBT people. In general, research and data sources inclusive of LGBT populations are limited, and substantial knowledge gaps exist regarding the socioeconomic circumstances of LGBT people and their participation in human services.

POVERTY AND ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY AMONG LGBT POPULATIONS

Analyses of nationally representative, population-based surveys suggest that LGBT people are more likely to face economic difficulties than are non-LGBT people. However, findings related to poverty risk vary for LGBT subpopulations and across analyses focusing on individual adults or couples.

For example, analyses conducted for this project of nationally representative data from the National Survey of Family Growth find that bisexual adults (but

LGBT identified adults are 1.7 times more likely than non-LGBT adults to report not having enough money for food in the last year (Gates 2014).



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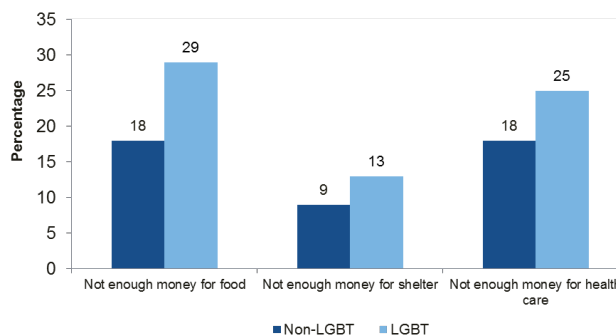
Analyses of nationally representative, population-based surveys suggest that LGBT people are more likely to face economic difficulties than are non-LGBT people.



not gay or lesbian adults) are more likely to be poor than heterosexual adults. Among bisexuals, certain subgroups have higher poverty rates than their heterosexual counterparts. These groups include women and people who are younger (age 18 to 24), have a high school diploma or less education, or are white or multiracial. Analyses focusing on couples and controlling for demographic characteristics have found that both male and female same-sex couples are more likely to be in poverty than are different-sex married couples.¹ No nationally representative, population-based data are available to assess the extent of poverty among transgender people.

Analyses of data from national surveys with population-based samples indicate that some LGBT populations receive benefits that support low-income people at significantly higher rates than non-LGBT populations do. Multivariate analyses that control for characteristics associated with the likelihood of receiving benefits (including poverty status) found that same-sex male and female couples are more likely to receive cash assistance and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits than similar married different-sex couples.²

LGBT adults were more likely than non-LGBT adults to report they did not have enough money for food, shelter, or health care in the past year



Source: Analyses of Gallup Daily Tracking Survey (June–December 2012) by Gary J. Gates, Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law.

Within LGBT populations, women in same-sex couples, racial/ethnic minorities, bisexuals, and households with children appear to be at highest risk of poverty.

RECEIPT OF INCOME SUPPORTS

In analyses focusing on adults ages 18 to 44, bisexual women were more likely than heterosexual women to report receiving cash assistance and SNAP benefits when controlling for other characteristics. Although no national population-based data are available to estimate benefit receipt among transgender people, a survey of a purposive sample of transgender adults found that approximately 5 percent of respondents reported receiving some type of public assistance.³

Observers may interpret relatively high levels of public assistance receipt among

LGBT populations as evidence that LGBT people do not encounter difficulties receiving these benefits. However, no research has confirmed or refuted this hypothesis.

Research Needs

Future research on LGBT populations' participation in services for low-income individuals and families could address the following topics:

Access to benefits among LGBT populations. This research could explore whether there are differences between eligible LGBT and non-LGBT people in the receipt of income supports.

Experiences among LGBT people in applying for and receiving benefits and services. To identify possible barriers to accessing services, studies could explore how LGBT people experience application processes, interactions with case managers, and other program services.

Options for improving data collection. A fuller understanding of LGBT populations' benefit receipt may depend on collecting administrative and survey data that includes items on sexual orientation and gender identity. Researchers could explore opportunities and barriers associated with collecting this information in program contexts.

STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE EFFECTIVELY TO LGBT PEOPLE

Interventions to support self-sufficiency among LGBT populations may need to address LGBT specific barriers to employment. Surveys of LGBT people suggest that large proportions encounter workplace challenges related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, in a nationally representative survey of LGBT adults conducted by the Pew Research Center, more than one in five LGBT individuals (21 percent) reported having ever been treated unfairly by an employer as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity.⁴ A small number of service providers offer employment assistance designed specifically for LGBT people, especially transgender people, but little is known about the nature or effectiveness of these services.

Research Needs

Studies are needed to identify and evaluate programs providing employment assistance targeting LGBT people. Future research could address:

Analyses of data from national surveys with population-based samples indicate that some LGBT populations receive benefits that support low-income people at significantly higher rates than non-LGBT populations do.



The implementation of employment assistance for low-income LGBT people.

Researchers could document the kinds of assistance that programs offer and help identify innovative service strategies.

Results of employment interventions. Evaluations could assess how participant outcomes compare with those of similar LGBT people who do not receive LGBT-specific services.

For more-detailed information and specific research suggestions, please visit the project webpage [here](#).

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Findings from a nationally representative survey of LGBT adults suggest that one in five LGBT individuals reported ever being treated unfairly by an employer as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

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