LGBT Youth & Extreme Poverty

Report to the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty

Issue Summary & Analysis

This past June, the Committee on the Rights of the Child released General Comment No. 21 on Children in Street Situations. The comment expounds at length on the variety of important rights impacted for children living in street situations.[[1]](#footnote-1) Moreover, the Committee specifically notes in its key observations that discrimination because of sexuality or gender identity is a cause of children ending up on the street.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the United States, LGBT youth represent 20-40% of homeless youth despite only making up around 5-10% of youth overall.[[3]](#footnote-3) LGBT youth are therefore statistically 4-13 times more likely to be homeless than their straight peers.[[4]](#footnote-4) Family rejection during a stage before an individual achieves fiscal independence contributes heavily to the disproportionate share of LGBT youth who are homelessness. This in turn leads to an increased risk of chronic extreme poverty. These early-life scenarios lead to systemic, long-term economic inequality for LGBT individuals.

*“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Human beings of all sexual orientations and gender identities are entitled to the full enjoyment of all human rights.”*

**The Yogyakarta Principles**

A variety of societal ills attach to LGBT youth homelessness and subsequent poverty. Once homeless, LGBT youth have higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse, increased danger of violence – sexual, emotional, and physical, and higher rates of mental illness.[[5]](#footnote-5) The overall rate of suicide attempts is already 4 times greater for LGB youth and 2 times greater for questioning youth than that of their straight peers.[[6]](#footnote-6) But, LGB youth who come from highly rejecting families are 8 times as likely to have attempted suicide as LGB peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection.[[7]](#footnote-7) Given that providers reported that 68% of LGBT homeless youth they served reported family rejection, a subset of extremely at-risk LGBT youth who are already at greater risk than straight peers, emerges.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Furthermore, as the Committee on the Rights of the Child indicates, once LGBT children or teens lose housing and fall into poverty, access to other rights erodes. Public education and voter registration in the U.S. are both based on physical addresses, creating an almost *de facto* loss of the attached rights for LGBT youth experiencing homelessness. While not a panacea, increasing resources and changing policy with a focus the subset of LGBT youth **for whom homelessness and extreme poverty are likely preventable using currently available early intervention methods designed to prevent or alleviate family rejection.** By targeting this specific subset of preventable LGBT youth homelessness, not only is considerably suffering avoided, but the strain on scarce social services resources is reduced and future health problems for these youth, strongly correlated with family rejection or acceptance, are avoided.[[9]](#footnote-9)

# Advocacy in Practice

There are two prongs to addressing these issues. First, LGBT youth-specific social service centers, like the Attic Youth Center, need to be created or non-specific centers need to be trained to handle the LGBT youth population. This ensure those already experiencing homelessness and extreme poverty receive appropriate help. Second, a policy shift, led by research-based intervention methods like the Family Acceptance Project, needs to occur to prevent family-rejection based LGBT youth homelessness.

Kemar Jewel, a young gay black man from Philadelphia, exemplifies how family rejection can act an primary, or sole, cause of homelessness and subsequent extreme poverty, and how these two prongs can be used to prevent or alleviate LGBT youth homelessness caused by family rejection.[[10]](#footnote-10) After being seen on a date with another boy, Kemar’s mother packed his things in a trash bag and told him he couldn’t live at home anymore. None of his other relatives would accept him either. He was homeless from age 16 until 20, often riding the subway for a few hours after it opened in the morning to catch some sleep, and “[t]he few times he did find housing, it was often with older men who sexually or physically abused him.” [[11]](#footnote-11)

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Jewel has since graduated from college and obtained housing. His success was possible in part because of the Attic Youth Center (“the Attic”). The Attic is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit focused on helping LGBT youth as both a social services center and a community center, often working through programs designed to preempt homelessness.[[12]](#footnote-12) Executive Director Carrie Jacobs, Ph.D., points out that there can be challenges for housing placement when social services don’t have experience with LGBT youth. Services need to be trained to avoid placement failures for LGBT youth.[[13]](#footnote-13) Both Kemar Jewel and the staff at the Attic are willing to speak with the Rapporteur, should he choose to visit Philadelphia.

The Family Acceptance Project (“FAP”) is designed as an early intervention program and seeks to work to prevent homelessness by facilitating family acceptable and overcoming public policy in social services that emphasizes avoiding family contact. Executive Director Caitlin Ryan, a clinician of 42 years and a professor, has undertaken significant research and developed a system of resources like pamphlets, videos, and a risk screener.

FAP works by focusing on behavioral changes, not value changes. In fact, Ryan uses underlying values to help families engage in healthier behaviors with their children. While the impulsive and immediate behaviors of family members can be very damaging, Ryan has found many parents filled with regret. Often the biggest challenge is that families don’t have guidance: “…parents and caregivers need accurate information and guidance to parent, nurture, and care for their LGBT children. Without education, accurate information and support for families from all background, how will they learn to help their children?”[[14]](#footnote-14) Ryan has distributed 500,000 pamphlets and trained 80,000 providers, families and religious leader over the years across the US and more than 70 other countries. Her work is translatable into any language or culture, given the resources, and she currently works with three different language populations, as well as a myriad of different cultures, across 15 early intervention sites in California.[[15]](#footnote-15) Her biggest issue isn’t too little research or need, but too little funding.

Ryan has found that about half of LGBT out-of-home youth ended up out-of-home because of family rejection.[[16]](#footnote-16) She sums the situation up best:

*One of the outcomes of failure to provide informed family support for LGBT youth has been disproportionately, unacceptably, and untenably high levels of health disparities, including suicidal behavior, HIV, substance abuse, homelessness, and removal and ejection from the home. As the age of coming out continues to drop to normative ages of sexual orientation and gender identity development—primarily due to widespread access to information about LGBT lives—the human cost will mount.[[17]](#footnote-17)*

Family rejection, while not always avoidable, can be prevented and mitigated in many cases. Doing so would greatly reduce the share of LGBT youth currently homeless or in social services settings.

Recommendations for Concluding Observations

The Rapporteur notes with concern that current policy in the social services often *de facto* exclude reunification with family members as a possibility, even where reunification may be both possible and beneficial. Given the significant health disparities for LGBT youth between family rejection and family acceptance, effort should be made to engage with families where possible using researched-backed methods like those of the Family Acceptance Project.

The Rapporteur calls on the U.S. government at the local, state, and federal level to ensure its social services are incorporating established and evolving research in their policies, particularly surrounding the care of LGBT youth. Governments at every level should train social service providers that work with youth, especially in the housing context, on the specific challenges and considerations when working with LGBT youth.

The Rapporteur recommends public policy stakeholders reevaluate social services models and work to incorporate current research and best practices concerning LGBT youth. LGBT youth specific social services should be developed where possible, and methods of practice should consider the research and experience of organizations like the Attic Youth Center and the Family Acceptance Project.

1. Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 21 on Children in Street Situations, U.N. Doc CRC/C/GC/21, at 9-21 (Jun. 21, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Id.* at 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. L.E. Durso & G.J Gates, The Williams Institute, Serving Our Youth: Findings from a National Survey of Service Providers Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth who are Homeless or At Risk of Becoming Homeless (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Andrew Burwick et. al., Identifying and Serving LGBTQ Youth: Case Studies of Runaway and Homeless Youth Program Grantees Final Report (February 14, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Id.*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. CDC, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Risk Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9-12: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Caitlin Ryan, *Generating a Revolution in Prevention, Wellness & Care for LGBT Children & Youth*, 23(2) Temp. Pol. & Civ. Rts. L. Rev., 331, 338 (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Durse. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Telephone interview with Caitlin Ryan, Executive Director, Family Acceptance Project (Sep. 23, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Alex Vuocolo, *A Look at LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in Philadelphia*, Generocity, <http://generocity.org/philly/2014/12/18/services-lgbtq-youth-homeless-philadelphia-need-coordination-funding/> (Dec. 18, 2014, 2:28 PM). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Interview with Carrie Jacobs, Executive Director, Attic Youth Center, in Philadelphia, PA (Sep. 26, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ryan at 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Telephone interview with Caitlin Ryan, Executive Director, Family Acceptance Project (Sep. 23, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Telephone interview with Caitlin Ryan, Executive Director, Family Acceptance Project (Sep. 23, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ryan at 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)