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# Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth

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This brief is part of a series that provides the current context, key data, and recommendations to support LGBTQ+ youth. The data highlights that LGBTQ+ youth in Indiana continue to face complex barriers, such as stigma, victimization, bias, and rejection, leading to poor outcomes. **Given the landscape, LGBTQ+ youth need youth serving professionals, advocates, and mentors more than ever.**

## LGBTQ+ Youth in the Child Welfare System

Family rejection on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity can have extreme effects on LGBTQ+ youth. Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth who reported higher levels of family rejection during adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs, and 3.4 times more likely to report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse, compared to peers from families that reported no levels of family rejection. As a result of family rejection, discrimination, criminalization and other factors, LGBTQ+ youth represent as much as 40% of the homeless youth population. Of that population, studies indicate that as many as 60% of the LGBTQ+ homeless youth population are likely to attempt suicide.<sup>1</sup>

**8.4x more likely to attempt suicide due to family rejection.**

LGBTQ+ youth are 3.8 times more likely to experience childhood sexual abuse, 1.2 times more likely to be physically abused by a caregiver, and nearly 2.5 times more likely to enter foster care than their heterosexual peers. Additionally, these youth are also overrepresented in the child welfare system. Recent studies suggest that 15% to 30% of youth in care identify as LGBTQ+, compared to only 3% to 11% of youth in the general population. While all system-involved youth face challenges, LGBTQ+ youth experience disparate outcomes due to bias and rejection based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Compared to their heterosexual peers, LGBTQ+ youth involved in the child welfare system are more likely to have adverse outcomes and yet, until recently, limited attention has been given to their specific needs, concerns, and experiences.<sup>2</sup>

LGBTQ+ youth enter foster care for many different reasons, but a significant number become involved in the child welfare system as a result of conflict with caregivers over their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.<sup>3</sup> Before entering care, many youth experience severe trauma and rejection by their family, peers, and/or community members. LGBTQ+ youth of color, compared to their White peers, are even more likely to experience rejection and violence and have elevated levels of stress and unique challenges related to their gender and sexual identities. Transgender youth also report violence from parents and families simply because of their identity. As referenced in the *2021 Indiana KIDS COUNT Data Book*, nationally, one in ten (10%) of those who were out to their immediate family reported that a family member was violent towards them because they were transgender, and 8% were kicked out of the house because they were transgender.<sup>4</sup>

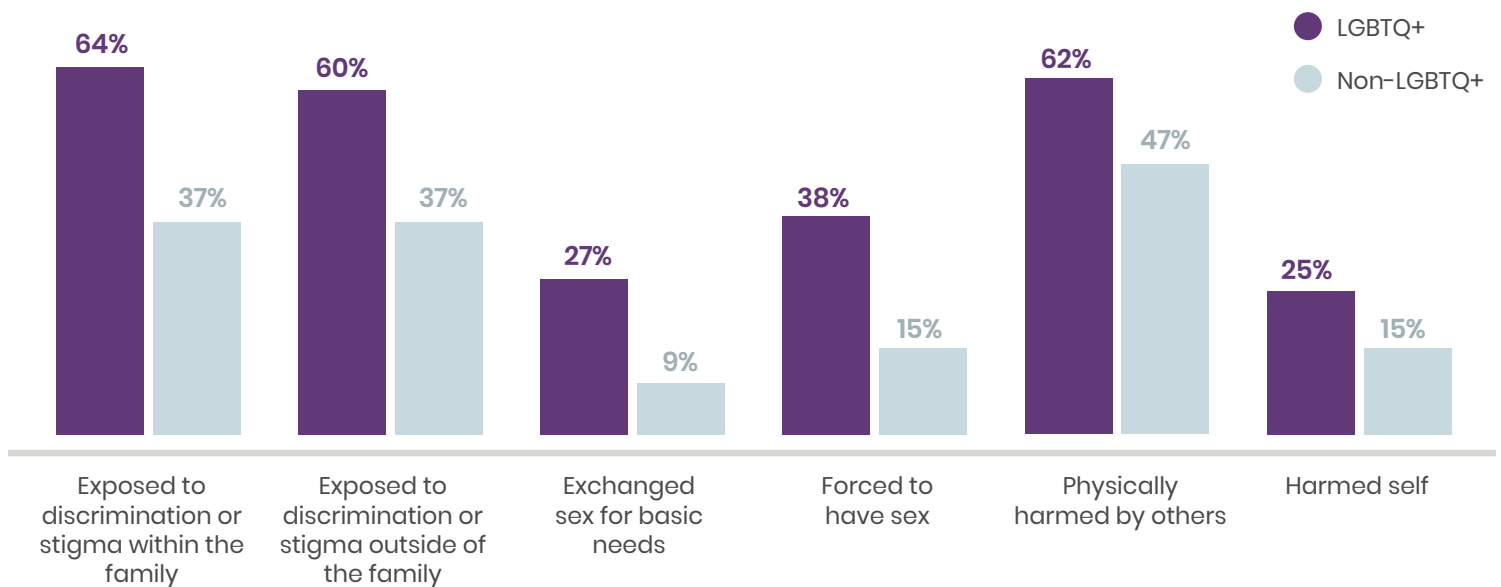
LGBTQ+ youth and young adults have a 120% higher risk of experiencing homelessness, often as the result of family rejection or discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. This risk is especially high among Black LGBTQ+ youth. Many members of the LGBTQ+ community face the added challenge of finding homeless shelters that will accept them and may experience elevated rates of harassment and abuse in these spaces.<sup>5</sup>

## What the data show:

- LGBTQ+ youth had over twice the rate of early death among youth experiencing homelessness.<sup>6</sup>
- 16% of LGBTQ+ youth, 22% of transgender youth, and 17% of LGBTQ+ youth of color are usually sleeping somewhere that is not the home of a parent or guardian, compared to 3% of non-LGBTQ+ youth.
- Only 16% LGBTQ+ youth are getting eight or more hours of sleep each night, compared to 22% of their non-LGBTQ+ peers.
- 44% of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing housing instability and sleep deprivation are earning As and Bs in school, while 76% of youth with stable housing and who are getting enough sleep are earning mostly As and Bs.<sup>7</sup>
- LGBTQ high school students are 2.2 times more likely to experience homelessness than heterosexual high school students, and transgender high school students are 9.2 times more likely to experience homelessness compared to non-transgender/cisgender high school students.<sup>8</sup>
- 78% of LGBTQ+ youth were removed or ran away from their foster placements as a result of hostility toward their sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>9</sup>

**Black youth who identified as LGBTQ+, especially young men, had the highest rates of homelessness.**

## Levels of Adverse Experience among LGBTQ+ and Non-LGBTQ+ Homeless Youth, United States: 2018



Source: VoYC In-Depth Interviews

## LEVERAGING THE DATA

### Locally

- **Affirm a youth's identity and if/when they disclose it:** Often, many LGBTQ+ youth in foster care experience verbal harassment or even physical violence after they are placed in out-of-home care. As a result, many youth experience multiple placement disruptions, compounding the trauma associated with leaving their families of origin. Rejection, maltreatment, and other traumas can be mitigated by foster and adoptive families who acknowledge, respect, and support LGBTQ+ youth in ways that nurture and protect the health, safety, and well-being of these young people. Many LGBTQ+ youth have reported muting their self-expression or are re-thinking their future plans. As a case worker, foster parent, or youth serving professional, look for ways that you can demonstrate to the young people that they can be themselves around you. Talk about how there is no "one way" to be a boy or a girl, for example, and avoid making assumptions about a young person's sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>10</sup> For additional ways to support an LGBTQ+ youth as a foster parent, please check out this [resource](#).
- **Stay up-to-date on the appropriate language:** Language matters because being mindful and choosing your words carefully is one of the simplest ways to create a safe space for all children and youth. Understanding and increasing your comfort level in using (or in some cases not using) specific terms helps not only LGBTQ+ children

and youth but can also help all youth know you are a safe person they can talk with about their feelings and go to for support and guidance. Like other forms of bullying, the use of specific words – or disregarding certain words and terms – can be seen as derogatory, hurtful manner. Service providers and youth serving organizations should also inspect the language used on paper work, resources, brochures, and forms to ensure it is welcoming and inclusive.<sup>11</sup> For a guide on LGBTQ+ words and term, please check out this [resource](#) (but remember language is evolving, so we recommend occasional research to continually learn the most up-to-date terms).

- **Acknowledge that there is more to an individual than sexual orientation and gender identity and expression:** Sexual orientation and gender identity and expression are only part of what makes an individual a whole person. Avoid making assumptions about a young person based entirely upon these particular characteristics. In fact, you may find that some LGBTQ+ children and youth are very outspoken about their identities and feel that this is a defining part of who they are, while others may not give it much thought at all. Do not assume that every struggle faced by an LGBTQ+ young person is the result of this aspect of their identity. Understand that many of their struggles are, in fact, a result of the lack of support they have received from their caretakers and peers.<sup>12</sup>

## Statewide

- **Recruit affirming foster care providers:** All children in foster care need nurturing homes that provide them with a safe place to process their feelings, freedom to express who they are, and structure to support them in becoming healthy adults.<sup>13</sup> Finding affirming placements for LGBTQ+ youth and working with existing foster parents to be supportive are necessary steps to promote healthy development.<sup>14</sup> The more foster and adoptive families can do to provide an authentically affirming and supportive space for the youth, the earlier the youth could potentially feel comfortable being out.<sup>15</sup> Foster parent recruitment and training strategies can fully explore issues and practices related to acceptance. For example, a potential parent may indicate in their screening that they are accepting and open-minded toward LGBTQ+ youth, but their actions at home may not align. Moreover, recruitment strategies can be targeted, use welcoming and inclusive messages, and engage meaningfully with the community.<sup>16</sup>

### Promising Practice

Tennessee's Department of Children's Services (DCS) implemented the Protocol for Reasonable and Prudent Parenting as guidance to foster parents, DCS staff, and its contractors on exercising reasonable and sensible parent standards with regard to LGBTQ+ youth in care. It specifies that exploring sexuality and gender identity is a typical part of growing up and that young people identifying as LGBTQ+ should be provided the same opportunities as any other child or youth. However, these young people may need additional or special support to manage exploration of their identity in a safe and nurturing environment. The protocol recommends parents and providers exercise flexibility to allow youth to participate in activities that create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth, including participating in LGBTQ+ support groups or organizations and experimentation with different styles of dressing and self-presentation. It clarifies that supportive activities may be further from the caregiver's home and recommends caregivers may accommodate transportation or adjust curfew. Finally, it recommends caretakers seek assistance and information on resources and opportunities for youth in their care if they are not aware of them and seek consultation with the youth's worker when needed.<sup>17</sup>

- **Ensure all youth out-of-home service providers receive LGBTQ+ cultural competency training:** To uphold cultural competency, systems and organizations are required to have a defined set of values and principles and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable them to work effectively with people of diverse backgrounds. Additionally, systems and organizations must have the capacity to value diversity, conduct self-assessment, manage the dynamics of difference, acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and adapt to the diversity and cultural contexts of the communities they serve.<sup>18</sup> Cultural competency trainings can help participants identify specific roles and skills needed for cultural competence, increase knowledge and understanding of cultural groups, and enhance participants' capacities to work in cross cultural situations with children, other foster and adoptive parents, and agency staff.<sup>19</sup> Supporting families and providers in understanding how to talk about these issues with one another, access and disseminate information on sexual orientation and gender identity, and understand ways to support LGBTQ+ children will enhance the nurturing capabilities of the youth's support systems.<sup>20</sup>
- **Share data and solicit feedback from stakeholders to foster accountability:** Accountability within child welfare and intersecting systems is essential. While accountability is dependent on the collection and analysis of good data, it can only be achieved once information is shared and used. Because agencies answer to clients, stakeholders, and the public at large, information regarding the child welfare population must be publicly available. When pursuing equity for LGBTQ+ youth and families within the child welfare system, communicating with stakeholders or partner organizations and soliciting feedback about reform efforts, goals and progress can influence agency decision-making. This form of meaningful engagement is an important part of ensuring the safety of children and families through the everyday decisions regarding placement, permanency and well-being.<sup>21</sup>

- **Extend prohibitions of discrimination against a child because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression throughout child welfare regulations:**

While many states, including Indiana, prohibit child welfare providers from discriminating against a child because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression in providing them with services, only four states prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression in the provision of child welfare services while also prohibiting foster parents or group home workers from using derogatory terms based on that child's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression when disciplining a child.<sup>22</sup> As Indiana's Department of Child Services seeks additional ways to support LGBTQ+ youth in the child welfare system, regulatory language from Ohio can be considered. Under Ohio Administrative Code Rule 5101:2-7-09:

- (B) A foster caregiver shall not discriminate in providing care and supervision to foster children on the basis of race, sex, gender, sexual identity, sexual orientation, religion, color or national origin; and
- (D) A foster caregiver shall not subject a foster child to verbal abuse or swearing; to derogatory remarks about foster children and their families, races, sex, gender, sexual identity, sexual orientation, religion, color or national origin; or to threats of physical violence or removal from the foster home.<sup>23</sup>

- **Support older youth with strategies focused on a person's identity, experiences, and needs:**

LGBTQ+ youth and youth of color are overrepresented among foster youth who never achieve permanency. It is important strategies focus on older youth transitioning out of the child welfare system, keeping the young person's identity, experiences, and needs in mind. When young people are emancipating from the child welfare system, it is important to provide services and supports that help young people make that transition successfully, including those that foster connections and that ensure young people are supported in meeting their basic needs. This is a period in a young person's development when rapid changes are occurring. Strategies should incorporate youth development principles and should be made in ways that promote the development of health sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression. Strategies to support older youth should include a focus on relational processing, logistical or physical causes of distress connected with aging out of foster care, and concerns that are unique to each youth to ensure individually tailored services.<sup>24</sup>

## Indiana Bill of Rights for Youth in Foster Care:

### Freedom from Discrimination and Prejudice

We have the right not to be discriminated against based on our race, color, religion, sex, gender, age, mental or physical disability, national origin, marital status, familial status, political views, financial situation, **sexual orientation**, or **gender identity**. We have the right to learn about these things in a safe and supportive environment.

Such discrimination poses a threat to the health, safety and general well-being of the citizens of the State of Indiana and menaces the institutions and foundation of our community. We have the right not to tolerate any hurtful or insensitive attitudes aimed at the above characteristics.

For the full Bill of Rights for Youth in Foster Care, please click [here](#).

Source: Indiana Department of Child Services

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> The Trevor Project (n.d.). Youth Homelessness.

<sup>2</sup> Casey Family Programs (2019). How can child welfare agencies effectively support LGBTQ+ youth in care?

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> National Center for Transgender Equality (2016). The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey.

<sup>5</sup> Chapin Hall at The University of Chicago (2018). Missed Opportunities: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Campaign Foundation (n.d.). LGBTQ Youth Are Living in Crisis: Key Findings From HRC Foundation Analysis of CDC Data

<sup>8</sup> SchoolHouse Connection (2021). Student Homelessness: Lessons From the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Campaign Foundation (n.d.). Caring for LGBTQ Children & Youth.

<sup>10</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway (2021). Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth: Guide for Foster Parents.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Campaign Foundation (n.d.). Caring for LGBTQ Children & Youth.

<sup>13</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway (2021). Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth: Guide for Foster Parents.

<sup>14</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy (2016). Out of the Shadows: Supporting LGBTQ Youth in Child Welfare through Cross-System Collaboration.

<sup>15</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway (2021). Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth: Guide for Foster Parents.

<sup>16</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy (2016). Out of the Shadows: Supporting LGBTQ Youth in Child Welfare through Cross-System Collaboration.

<sup>17</sup> Tennessee Department of Children's Services (n.d.). Protocol for Reasonable and Prudent Parenting.

<sup>18</sup> SAMHSA (2008). Providing Services and Supports for Youth who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex or Two-Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> Spaulding for Children (n.d.). Cultural Competence Training for Foster and Adoptive Parents.

<sup>20</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy (2016). Out of the Shadows: Supporting LGBTQ Youth in Child Welfare through Cross-System Collaboration.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ohio Administrative Code (2019). Rule 5101:2-7-09.

<sup>24</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy (2016). Out of the Shadows: Supporting LGBTQ Youth in Child Welfare through Cross-System Collaboration.