

Task Force Releases Report on Homeless Youth

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By Amy Wooten

A recently released report by the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, in collaboration with the National Coalition for the Homeless, reveals the epidemic of homelessness among LGBT youth.

The report, "Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness," estimates that out of an estimated 1.6 million homeless youth in the United States, between 20 and 40 percent are LGBT. These figures are based on available research. The report also provides a glimpse into why LGBT youth are at such a high risk for homelessness and other critical problems that impact them.

The Task Force reports that in a study of homeless youth in Illinois, nearly 15 percent identified as LGB, "questioning" or "something else." Chicago published a report in 2005 where the rate for these groups was roughly 23.1 and 22.4 percent, respectively. A youth group in Decatur found that 42 percent of homeless youth identified as LGB.

According to a fact sheet released by The Task Force, The Night Ministry estimates there are between 12,000 and 15,000 homeless youth in Chicago, and between 1,448 and 3,000 of these youth are LGBT. The Task Force estimates that there are between 5,000 and 10,000 LGBT homeless youth in Illinois statewide, based on available research that suggests 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth are LGBT.

According to the new report, there are many causes of youth homelessness, but family conflict is the primary reason, regardless of the child's sexual orientation. One study shows that 50 percent of gay teens experienced a negative reaction from their family when they came out of the closet, and 26 percent were actually kicked out of their home.

The report also says that other issues that impact gay homeless youth are mental health issues, such as depression; substance abuse (studies show between 10 and 20 percent homeless youth identify as users) ; and risky sexual behavior, such as "survival sex" for food and shelter. One Canadian study suggests that LGBT homeless youth are three times more likely to participate in survival sex.

Another issue that impacts homeless youth is victimization, such as abuse and harassment. According to the National Runaway Switchboard, LGBT homeless youth are seven times more likely to be a victim of a crime. According to The Task Force's report, LGBT youth are also disproportionately the victims of abuse and harassment within the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

The report also discusses the hardships faced by trans youth. According to the report, trans youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless population, with some studies suggesting one in five are at risk of needing homeless shelter assistance. Also discussed is the treatment trans youth receive in homeless shelters nation wide.

Adding fuel to the fire is the federal response to youth homelessness. Although some funds have been awarded to agencies that work with LGBT homeless youth, in general, homeless youth programs, according the report, are severely underfunded.

The Task Force's report concludes with policy recommendations that it says will not only help LGBT youth, but all homeless youth, such as reauthorizing and increasing funds for federal homeless youth programs; developing a national estimate of homelessness among youth; raising federal and state wages; and having states dedicate funds specifically for LGBT homeless youth and much more.