

Homelessness among gay youth rises

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While the adult gay community in New Jersey won a political victory when Gov. Corzine signed the civil unions law today, their younger counterparts don't appear to be faring as well.

A recent report, "Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness," by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in collaboration with the National Coalition for the Homeless, reveals an epidemic of homelessness among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth.

According to statistics cited by the federally funded National Runaway Switchboard, 42 percent of homeless youth identify as gay or lesbian, which is grossly disproportionate given that approximately 3 to 5 percent of the U.S. population identifies as gay or lesbian. (Additional research has found that homeless youth also disproportionately identify as bisexual or transgender.)

Based on these estimates, up to 8,400 of the 15,000 to 20,000 homeless youth estimated to live in New York City are LGBT. Nationwide, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, each year between 570,000 and 1.6 million youth are homeless or run away. This means that up to 672,000 of these youth are LGBT.

The report answers some basic questions, including why so many LGBT youth are becoming and remaining homeless. In addition, it addresses the harassment and violence that many of these youth experience in existing public shelter systems and summarizes research on critical problems affecting these youth, including mental health issues, substance abuse and risky sexual behavior. The report also analyzes the federal government's response to youth homelessness, including the specific impact on LGBT homeless youth of increased federal funding for faith-based service providers.

"The heartbreaking epidemic of homelessness among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth is both fueled and ignored by powerful forces across the country, including many who cloak themselves in 'family values,'" said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "We salute New York City and its City Council for embracing these kids and responding with compassion and resources."

New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn added, "'This study illustrates that the challenges LGBT youth face can become so great that kids are left displaced and homeless. It is crucial that we provide the resources for connecting these young people with safe shelter, health care and educational services. The City Council is proud to have made the needs of LGBT homeless youth a priority, and we will continue our work to ensure these young people get the services they need.'"

The report was Dec. 14 at New York City Hall. Key findings include:

* Family conflict, including conflict over a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity, is the primary cause for young people becoming homeless. In one study, 50 percent of gay male teens

who came out to their parents experienced a negative reaction and 26 percent of them were told they must leave home.

* LGBT youth report experiencing discrimination, harassment and violence at shelters and service providers. For example, one facility in Michigan forced youth who identified as or were perceived as being LGBT to wear orange jumpsuits.

* LGBT homeless youth are more likely to suffer from mental health issues and substance abuse than are their heterosexual peers, and are more likely to be victimized by sexual predators.

The report concludes with a series of state-, federal-, and practitioner-level policy recommendations that can help to curb this epidemic, including:

* Establishing funding streams to provide housing options for all homeless youth and requiring that recipients of these funds are committed to the safe and appropriate treatment of LGBT homeless youth.

* Permitting dedicated shelter and housing for LGBT youth.

* Extending comprehensive health insurance and services through the age of 24 to all low-income youth via Medicaid.

* Requiring all agencies that seek public funding and licensure to serve homeless youth to adopt nondiscrimination policies for LGBT youth.

* Mandating LGBT awareness training as a part of the professional licensing process for all health care, social service, child welfare and juvenile justice agency staff.

For more information, including a copy of the report, visit www.thetaskforce.org.