



Building Bridges

A Beginner's Guide for Libraries:

Reaching out to

LGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness

From

The University of Tennessee

School of Information Sciences

LAMBDA Project

Real Voices

“I sought out my local public library to access their wifi, and occasionally their computers. I thought the library would be a good place to spend the day when I was couch surfing and needed to make myself disappear during the day. I went to the closest library up the road to discover you couldn't use their wifi without a library card.”

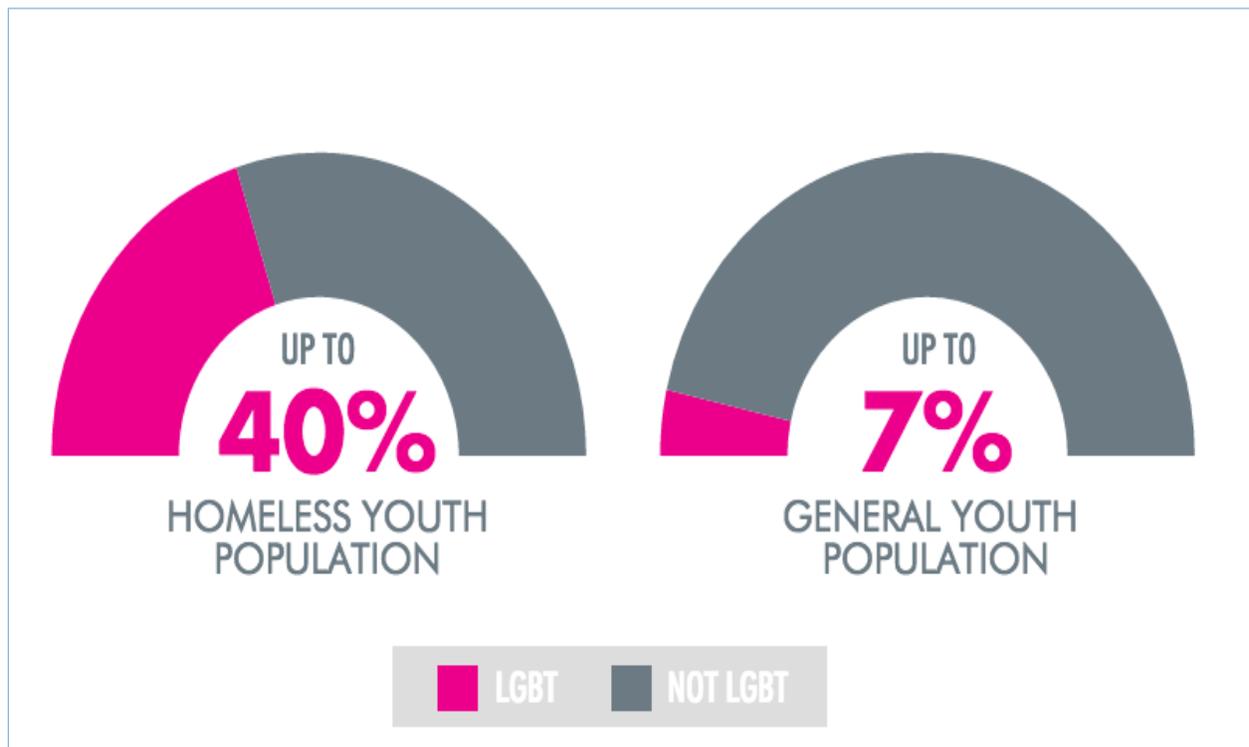
Caitlyn, California

“They're rude here...I don't think they understand that people are low-income... And maybe it's not a rule here that you have to be considerate of people like that, you know? So they have this view of people, when you walk in it's like you're going to do something wrong, that's what I can feel.”

Monica, California

“My mom kicked me out for being myself and she doesn't even know who I am.”

Cedar, California



1 This graphic from the [True Colors Fund](#) emphasizes the contrast between the percentage of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness versus the percentage of LGBTQ+ youth in the general population.

Terms Regarding Homelessness and Care

Homelessness

- A person experiencing homelessness has no predictable, safe and consistent place to sleep or live. People experiencing homelessness may sleep on the streets, in cars, emergency housing, motels, on the floor or couches of friends or relatives, under overpasses or bridges. *A person experiencing homelessness must live their private life in public.*

Ally

- Someone who advocates for and supports members of a community other than their own.

Stigma

- The result of false ideas people have when they describe someone they see as “different.”
- Separates the individual from the rest of their community.
- People First Language helps a person feel respected rather than labeled as “abnormal” or “dysfunctional,” eliminating the stigma of a mental health diagnosis.

Throwaway Youth

- Are abandoned/deserted.
- Are told to leave home by a parent or other adult in the household.
- Leave and are prevented from returning home.
- Run away and whose parents/caretakers make no effort to recover them/do not care if they return.

Invisible Homelessness

- No accurate count.
- Includes couch surfing, sleeping outside or in vehicles.
- Nighttime shelter can be more fluid for young people than for adults – couch surfing one day, shelter the next, a friend’s floor the next, the streets the next.

Continuum of Care

- Continuum of Care (CoC) is a regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for families and individuals experiencing homelessness.
- CoCs represent communities of all kinds, including major cities, suburbs and rural areas.

Trauma-Informed Care

- An organizational structure and treatment framework that involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma.
- A traumatic event can involve physical, emotional or sexual abuse, war, community violence, neglect, maltreatment, loss, natural disasters, terrorism, witnessing violence or experiencing violence vicariously, or chronic adversity.

Terms Regarding the LGBTQ+ Community

Gender Identity

- One's personal experience of one's own gender.
- Usually based on one or more genders in a society.
- Forms the internal framework for one's behavior.

Common Gender Identities

- **Cisgender** – People who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.
- **Transgender** – People whose gender identity is different from that assigned at birth.
- **Genderqueer** – Used by people who do not identify as either male or female but may identify as a combination or fluctuation of the two. People who are genderqueer may also be agender (see below) or identify as a third gender.
- **Gender fluid** – People whose gender identification and presentation are fluid.
- **Agender** – People who do not identify with any gender.

Gender Expression/Presentation

- How one presents oneself in society, often through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice or body characteristics.

Personal Pronouns

- Also known as PGP or "Personal Gender Pronoun."
- Allows a person to state what pronoun they use and would like to be used when being referred to.

Sexual Orientation

- A pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction to men, women, both genders, neither gender, or another gender.
- Unrelated to gender identity or expression.

Common Sexual Orientations

- **Lesbian/Gay** – A person who is only interested in romantic and/or physical relationships with other people of their same gender.
- **Bisexual** – A person who is interested in romantic and/or physical relationships with least two genders.
- **Pansexual** – A person who does not consider gender when looking for romantic or physical partners.
- **Asexual** – A person who does not experience sexual attraction to anyone of any gender.

What these young people need from your library

Access to

- Books and other printed materials.
- CDS, DVDs.
- The Internet: This is critical for these young people. To stay in touch with friends and family, to apply for housing, school, employment, to explore local and national options.

Practical Needs

- Education: FAFSA, applications, information about local programs, lists of schools.
- Housing: Finding it, affording it, applying for it, fact sheets, websites.
- Employment: Finding jobs, applying for jobs, interview skills, résumé writing.
- Food: Places to obtain free or low cost meals, food items.
- Health services: Fact sheets, books, websites, how to stay healthy on the streets.
 - Transgender youth: Where to get hormones, lists of trans-friendly doctors/clinics.
- Legal rights: Interacting with the police, clearing citations or tickets, changing a legal name, places to get help.

Emotional Needs

- A place to just “be”, where they don’t feel observed or judged; a place to blend in.
- To be accepted for who they are.
- To be respected for their expertise about their own lives and bodies.
- To feel safe.
- A sense of community, to belong somewhere. This can include people they meet at the library, through interactions with library staff, other patrons, through attending programs.
- Library staff can provide both personal connections and social capital, which can be low for these young people.

Culture

As library staff, ask yourselves:

- Who are you trying to welcome?
- What do displayed materials, signs, posters, featured programs and the general environment do to welcome everyone?
- How might your policies or procedures create barriers to serving youth experiencing homelessness?
 - Do patrons need a permanent address to obtain a library card or use the Internet computers?
 - Do you have policies related to bathroom use, sleeping, odor, attire, food and beverages, baggage, being actively engaged with library materials?
- What barriers exist that impede library staff in providing services, programs or materials for these youth?
- Imagine you spent the night in a doorway, you're exhausted, lonely, anxious, traumatized, hungry and you've had negative experiences with bureaucracies, the housed public and police officers. What does the library say to you about:
 - What's important to offer?
 - Who is welcome?
 - What is easily obtained?
 - What is worth mentioning?
 - Who is safe and who isn't safe?

Consider Attitudes

One way to create a welcoming environment for these young people is to assess your attitudes.

- Examine your fears: What is it about folks experiencing homelessness that scares you? Is it related to housing status or stereotypes?
- Think about the stereotypes: What are they? Why do you have them? What could you do to separate these from the people who are simply unstably housed?
- Provide training for staff: Invite in service providers, social workers, public health workers, and the youth themselves.
- Vocabulary: Learn and use the vocabulary related to not only being LGBTQ+ but also related to housing.
- Use respect as a tool: Start with respect. Always.
- Practice: Practice using positive, youth-focused language. Instead of "at risk," think about how you could describe them in a way that supports their strengths. They're not innately at risk – society has put them at risk by attitudes toward LGBTQ+ lives, homelessness, mental health life experiences.
- Reach out: Learn their names and pronouns and use them.

What Your Library Can Do

In the Library

Offer programs related to their lives:

- Health eating on the streets.
- Knowing your rights.
- Preparing for a job interview.
- Parent discussion group for parents of LGBTQ+ children – maybe you could help prevent a young person from being kicked out of their family home.
- Screen a film: Invite community agencies, the youth, the public. Include discussions.

Displays

- Incorporate materials about LGBTQ+ lives into all your displays.

Posters

- Post “[hate free zone](#),” “[safe space](#),” “[trans ally](#),” or rainbow flag posters.

Bathrooms

- Consider creating an “all genders” bathroom.
- The signage could simply be “Everyone” or have a toilet graphic.

Offer your space to a local youth-serving agency

- For meetings.
- For interviews.
- For classes.
- Offer the use of your computers.

Display art and writings

- Invite youth to submit their work.
- Consider having a “meet the author” or “meet the artist” event.

Library cards

- Create Internet-only cards that don’t require a permanent address.
- Allow them to use a service agency’s address for a card.
- Lift restrictions on permanent address requirements.

Honor books

- Create an honor shelf that doesn’t require a library card.
- Include high interest, relevant books.
- Ask the youth for suggestions.

I.D.s

- Work with a local agency to help create laminated picture I.D.s .

Pamphlets

- Create a pamphlet that will be useful to them and will let them know you welcome them.

Maps

- Create a quarter sheet map that shows the route between your library and a place they may congregate, so they know you want them at your library.

Partner with Community Agencies

Know what your community is doing

- Showers
- Drop-in centers
- Meals
- Housing
- Programs
- Employment resources



Reach out to local agencies, organizations

- Let them know what you have to offer.
- Let them know you'd like to work together.
- Find common goals.
- Attend meetings, invite them to your meetings.

Work collaboratively

- Maintain a small collection at a local shelter.
- Take a library laptop and register them for cards, clear fines.
- Offer a tour of the library to service providers and youth.
- Be a local or national partner.

Advocate

- Use your voice as a respected institution to speak out for more funding for shelters, housing, support services.

Participate

- In the local [Point-In-Time](#) (PIT) count for unsheltered youth. See more information about this on the [HUD](#) website.

Examples of Community Partnerships

- Local adult LGBTQ+ community.
- Local government groups.
- Local service groups.
- Faith community
 - Many faith groups are welcoming and affirming for LGBTQ+ youth.
 - May help parents who are struggling with what they see as a conflict between their religious beliefs and their child's sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Schools
 - Middle and high schools: Sponsor training and/or parenting workshops on LGBTQ+ youth. Include: bullying, mental health, P.E.
 - Community colleges, colleges, universities, adult education: Collaborate on creating safe and supportive environment for all.
- Local clinics/doctors
 - Create a list of resources.
- Local law enforcement
 - Share resources, challenges, ideas.



Be An Ally

- Challenge biased and hateful language.
- Use their pronouns.
- Use gender-affirming or gender neutral language.
- See their strengths:
 - Creative
 - Courageous
 - Resilient
 - Resourceful
- Be welcoming
 - Create an environment that says “Yes!” to these young people. They’ll notice.

A Small Selection of Recommended Resources

Videos - available online

- [Kicked Out](#)
- [A Day in Our Shoes](#)
- [The Home Stretch](#) - Trailer
- [Families are Forever](#) - Trailer (from the [Family Acceptance Project](#))
- [Always My Son](#) - Trailer (from the [Family Acceptance Project](#))

Websites - some include reports/resources that can be downloaded

- [Things People Never Told Me](#)
 - From foster youth; includes a wide range of topics; excellent ideas for libraries.
- [National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth](#)
 - Vocabulary, staff training, suggestions from National Alliance to End Homelessness; excellent for libraries.
- [Why They Run: An In-Depth Look at America's Runaway Youth](#)
 - Provides great insights into why young people end up on the streets.
- [Extending Our Reach: Reducing Homelessness Through Library Engagement](#)
 - Booklet from ALA/ODLOS on homelessness and libraries.
- [California Homeless Youth Project](#)
 - Includes an array of resources including videos and articles; provides excellent background on youth homelessness, suggestions for positive actions, and videos that give insight into the lives of these youth.
- [National Runaway Safeline](#)
 - "Here to listen. Here to talk."
 - Support for youth, as well as parents and guardians.
- [LAMBDA: Library Anchor Models for Bridging Diversity Achievements](#)
 - Three-year IMLS grant pilot project offering workshops, a Summit, a website and trainings for rural and urban librarians in east Tennessee and California.
 - The website includes suggestions and resources for all public librarians, as well as youth, parents and service providers.
- [True Colors Fund](#)
 - "The True Colors Fund works to end homelessness among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, creating a world in which young people can be their true selves."
 - This fund raises awareness about and addresses LGBTQ youth homelessness. It has great resources for parents, youth, teachers and service providers.

- [PFLAG](#) (Parents, Families, Friends, and Allies United with LGBTQ People to Move Equality Forward)
 - Excellent first step for families, teachers, librarians, allies. Includes myriad resources.
- [GLSEN](#) (Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network)
 - Research webinars.
 - Includes experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in urban & rural schools.



Final Words

Addressing LGBTQ+ youth homelessness is an ongoing and multidimensional effort. If it feels overwhelming to think about the role your library could take, we suggest you **start small**.

Starting Small

- Connect with one local agency by calling or stopping by. Introduce yourself and ask how you could work together. Ask if you could attend one of their meetings.
- Sign up for a newsletter from one national organization and read it regularly.
- Watch one of the recommended online videos and think about one action your library could take.
- Download one report and read it.
- Post a rainbow flag/hate free zone poster or place a rainbow flag on your badge.
- Post the list of terms for all staff and discuss how to incorporate these definitions into your daily library lives.
- Add one LGBTQ+ related book to existing displays.
- Take a step back and assess your library. Is it welcoming for all? If not, consider one change you could make.

Taking the Next Step

- Screen “The Homestretch” at your library and bring in speakers for discussions.
- In collaboration with the local schools or a local LGBTQ+ center, host a discussion group/workshop for parents whose children identify as LGBTQ+.
- Create a pamphlet highlighting resources for these young people.

For more information or to offer comments, ideas, and suggestions, please contact Julie Winkelstein at jwinkels@utk.edu



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