



Libraries as Allies

A Beginner's Guide for Libraries:

Welcoming and Supporting Unaccompanied

LGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness

from

The University of Tennessee

School of Information Sciences

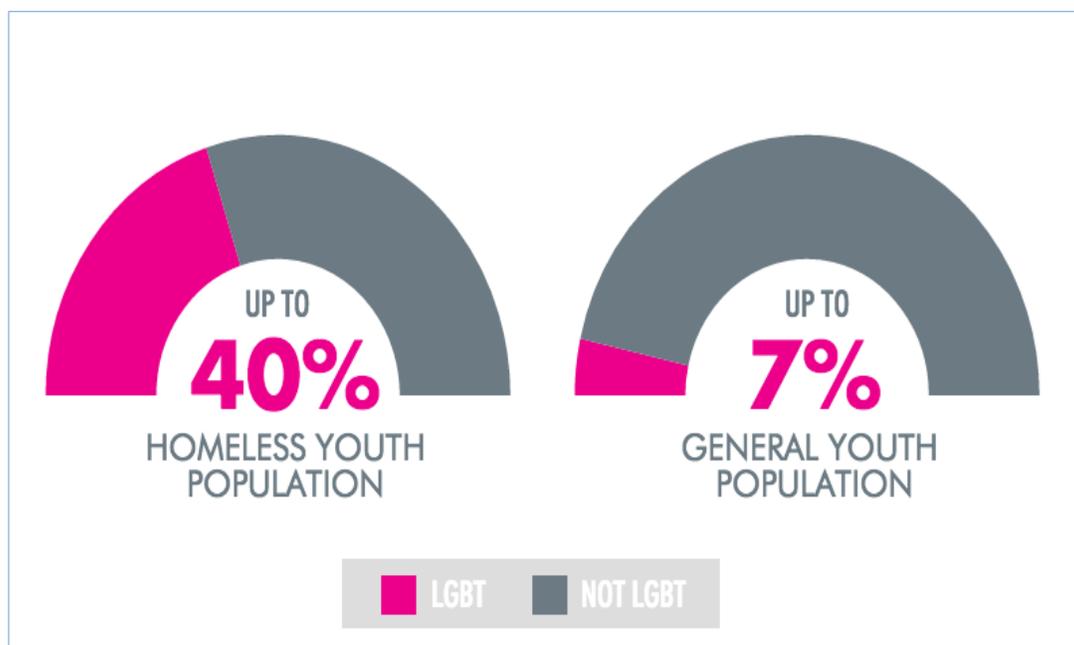
LAMBDA Project

Statistics

From: [True Colors Fund](#)

550,000/year: Youth ages 12 to 24 who experience homelessness in the U.S.

50,000/year: Youth served by targeted youth homeless programs in the U.S.



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

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

“When you walk in [to the library] 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

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. Experiencing homelessness can be *traumatic, exhausting* and *boring*. In addition, a person experiencing homelessness must live *their private life in public*. Knowing a person is experiencing homelessness doesn't tell you anything about their mental health, employment status, education or hygiene. It simply tells you they don't have a safe place to lay their head at night.

Ally

- Someone who advocates for and supports members of a community other than their own. Library staff can make great allies for these young people.

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 related to mental health, housing status, LGBTQ+ lives.

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 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.

Transition(al) Age Youth (TAY)

- Usually defined as youth ages 16 to 24.
- Many services and programs focus on this age.
- These youth may be aging out of the foster care system.

Harm Reduction

- Non-judgmental philosophy.
- Allows the person to have input into the next steps in their lives.
- Supports non-shaming and non-coercive provision of resources and services.

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.

These are simply examples – the language around gender is as fluid as gender itself.

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** – People who are 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 at least two genders.
- **Pansexual/Omnisexual** – A person who does not consider gender when looking for romantic or physical partners.
- **Asexual** – On a spectrum, having a lack or low level of sexual attraction to others.

What these young people need from your library

Access to

- Books and other printed materials.
- CDS, DVDs, other forms of entertainment.
- 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 healthy meals, food items.
- Health services: Fact sheets, books, websites, how to stay healthy on the streets.
 - Transgender youth: Where to obtain 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, knowing a person's rights as a minor.

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.
- By interacting with and listening to them, library staff can provide both personal connections and social capital, which may 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 unaccompanied 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 to these youth?
- Imagine you spent the night in a doorway, you're exhausted, alone, 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 consider your attitude.

- Examine your perspective: What is it about people experiencing homelessness that is difficult for you? Is it related to their housing status or stereotypes?
- Think about the stereotypes: What are they? Why do you have them? What could you do to separate these stereotypes from housing status itself?
- 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 and social services.
- 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 recognizes 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. Tell them your name.

What Your Library Can Do

In the Library

Offer programs related to their lives

- Healthy eating on the streets.
- Knowing your legal rights.
- Preparing for a job interview.
- Host a discussion group for parents of LGBTQ+ children - this could help prevent a young person from being kicked out of their family home.
- Screen a film: Invite community agencies, these youth, the housed public. Include discussions. Offer youth the opportunity to talk about their lives.

Displays

- Incorporate materials about LGBTQ+ lives into *all* of your displays.
- Display books and other materials related to the experience of being unstably housed.

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.
- For computer and Internet access.

Display art and writings

- Invite these young people to submit their work.
- Host a "meet the author" or "meet the artist" event at your library.

Library cards

- Create Internet-only cards that don't require a permanent address.
- Allow them to use a social 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.
- Be sure to ask these youth for suggestions.



I.D.s

- Work with a local agency to help create laminated picture I.D.s . These are critical for accessing services and support.

Pamphlets

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

Maps

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

Partner with Community Agencies

Know what your community is doing

- Safe places to shower
- Drop-in centers
- Free or low cost meals
- Inclusive housing
- Relevant 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.
- Regularly attend meetings, invite them to your meetings.

Work collaboratively

- Maintain a small collection at a local youth shelter.
- Take a library laptop to a shelter 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 experience 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 tips on: Bullying, mental health, participation in gym class.
 - Community colleges, colleges, universities, adult education: Collaborate on creating a 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](#). For more information, read this 2015 [New York Times article](#) about gender neutral pronouns and names at the University of Vermont.
- Use gender-affirming or gender neutral language.
- See their strengths:
 - Creative
 - Courageous
 - Resilient
 - Resourceful
- Use a trauma-informed approach to interactions.
- Be welcoming
 - Create an environment that says “Yes!” to these young people. They will notice.



A Small Selection of Recommended Resources

Videos - available online

- [Kicked Out](#)
- [A Day in Our Shoes](#)
- [The Home Stretch](#) – Trailer
- [Paper Tigers](#) - Trailer
- [Always My Son](#) - Trailer (from the [Family Acceptance Project](#))
- [Families are Forever](#) - 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; useful ideas for libraries.
- [National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth](#)
 - Vocabulary, staff training, suggestions. Excellent for libraries.
- Why They Run: An In-Depth Look at America's Runaway Youth (<https://www.1800runaway.org/homeless-teen-research/why-they-run/>)
 - Provides good 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](#)
 - Resources include videos and articles, excellent background on youth homelessness, suggestions for positive actions.
- National Runaway Safeline (<https://www.1800runaway.org/>)
 - "Here to listen. Here to talk."
 - Support for youth, as well as parents and guardians.
- [LAMBDA: Library Anchor Models for Bridging Diversity Achievements](#)
 - Includes suggestions and resources for librarians, youth, parents and service providers.
- [National LGBTQ Task Force](#)
 - LGBTQ+ advocacy group. Includes resources, support.
 - [Transitioning Our Shelters](#) provides information and tips.
- [True Colors Fund](#)
 - The True Colors Fund raises awareness about and addresses LGBTQ+ youth homelessness. They have in-depth resources for parents, youth, teachers and service providers.
- PFLAG (<https://www.pflag.org/>) (Parents, Families, Friends, and Allies United with LGBTQ People to Move Equality Forward)
 - Good 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 seems confusing when you think about the role your library could play, we suggest you **start small**.

Starting Small

- Connect with one local social services agency by calling or stopping by. Introduce yourself and ask how you could work together. Ask if you can attend one of their meetings.
- Sign up for a newsletter from one national homelessness or LGBTQ+ organization and read it regularly. Talk to one library staff member about it.
- Watch one of the recommended online videos and think about one action your library could take.
- Download one recommended report and read it. How could it relate to your library?
- Post a rainbow flag/hate free zone poster or place a small 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.
- Add your pronouns to the end of your email signature.

Taking the Next Step

- Screen “The Homestretch” at your library and bring in speakers for discussions. If possible, include local youth experiencing homelessness.
- In collaboration with the local schools or a local LGBTQ+ center, host a discussion group/workshop for parents whose children identify as LGBTQ+.
- Invite a social worker or mental health professional to talk to staff about trauma and trauma-informed care. Introduce the topic with this video: [TED Talk: "The Paradox of Trauma-Informed Care"](#).
- [Participate in your local HUD youth Point-in-Time \(PIT\) count](#). See these tips from the True Colors Fund: [Youth Count Toolkit](#).
- Using the Action Plan template from the LAMBDA website, list three actions your library could take, one barrier to each action, and ideas for addressing these barriers.

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