

## **LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness in Delaware:**

### **Building a Case for Targeted Surveillance and Assessment of LGBTQ+ Youth Needs and Experiences**

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#### **Abstract**

**Objective:** In this article, we examine the issue of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Delaware, summarize current services available and prior research work that has been done, examining the number, needs, and experiences of unaccompanied unhoused LGBTQ+ youth. **Methods:** We provide a literature review detailing risks associated with LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, resources available, and prior studies and surveys examining this population. **Results:** LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable to physical and mental health challenges, abuse, and violence. The unique needs of this population necessitate specialized resources, yet there are a limited number of such resources available in Delaware and a dearth of information on youth homelessness in general, including LGBTQ+ youth. For example, administrative barriers exist for unaccompanied queer youth seeking shelter services, such as need for legal identification or being grouped in shelter populations based on sex assigned at birth rather than gender identity. Exposure to unsafe environments is a general problem for queer youth. This can make public spaces feel unsafe and increase risk of physical or mental harm, mistreatment, or abuse when seeking shelter outside of agency services and resources. In order to accurately identify and appropriately serve this population, additional research is necessary. **Conclusions:** Evidence building is a critical first step in creating an effective study to examine the issue of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Delaware. With the evidence acquired in our literature review our next step to establish an informed methodology is to hold service provider and LGBTQ+ lived experience focus groups. Through a qualitative approach we aim to learn how to appropriately utilize the quantitative tools identified in our analysis and to assess what questions are missing to advance the needs of this population.

## Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) youth compose an estimated 20-40% of youth experiencing homelessness (ages 13-24) in the United States, despite only representing 10-15% of the youth population.<sup>1</sup> While some social services are available to aid unhoused youth, there is not a clear picture of what resources exist at state and local levels to address housing instability and homelessness among LGBTQ+ youth. Moreover, even less is understood about how youth learn about such services, how they access them, if they are meeting the needs of the youth population—and importantly—how systemic inequities influence disparities in LGBTQ+ youth service utilization at local levels.

A study of the nature and extent of this problem, including an assessment of the number of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness in Delaware (DE), has not been undertaken. In response, this work aims to lay a foundation for assessing the true number of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness, and the scope of need of this population. As the first step for adequately measuring these factors, here we draw upon past research, existing survey tools, and a basic inventory of DE-specific resources to establish an informed approach for future methodology aimed at enumerating the number of queer youth experiencing homelessness in DE and their needs.

The article is laid out as follows: first we provide a definition for homelessness, how we define unaccompanied LGBTQ+ youth, and current estimates of the number of youth experiencing homelessness in DE. The next section briefly explores risks associated with experiencing homeless for queer youth and structural inequities that influence social service utilization. Then, we offer examples of past efforts to quantify and further understand LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in the United States. Next we explore services and resources available to LGBTQ+ youth throughout the state of Delaware. We finish by offering insights into how this review could support future work throughout the state.

## Counting and Defining Homelessness and Unaccompanied LGBTQ+ Youth

The U.S. Department of Education classifies homelessness as: “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,”<sup>2</sup> which includes those residing in shelters, hotels, cars, vacant buildings, and on the streets as well as couch surfers (i.e., those that may stay temporarily in a series of other people's homes, typically by sleeping on their couches).<sup>1</sup> Data from Delaware’s Point in Time Count (PIT) of the homeless population estimates the number of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January each year.<sup>3</sup> PIT measurements are presently some of the best and longest running estimates of those experiencing homelessness and unstable housing throughout the state. For example, over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2019 to 2022, it is estimated that the number of homeless individuals throughout the state doubled, and tripled in some cases, composed of approximately 392 families with children, 769 children under the age of 18, and 200 young adults ages 18-24.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the PIT measures, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvement Act of 2001, which is explored more in subsequent sections, also maintains counts of unhoused youth accessing public education in a given state in a given year through the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE).<sup>5</sup> Delaware’s 43 Local Education Agencies report the number of unhoused

students in their respective district and also subgroups of children with disabilities, those with limited English proficiency, migratory youth, and unaccompanied homeless youth.<sup>5</sup> As a result, NCHE counts are higher than PIT numbers due to varying definitions of homelessness. The NCHE estimates that there were 2,576 enrolled students experiencing homeless in DE in the 2020-21 school year—and an estimated 265 were unaccompanied youth.<sup>5</sup> However, it is unclear which measure is most accurate. Nevertheless, in a state like Delaware with a population of less than a million people these rates are cause for concern.

Factors associated with experiencing homelessness in youth vary. Therefore, it is important to note that not all LGBTQ+ youth encounter homelessness due to familial rejection or abuse, some encounter it due to household factors, like economic instability, that cause the whole family to lose housing. A recent scholarly review cites that the leading causes of persistent homelessness among adults were linked to substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental illness.<sup>6</sup> However, our analysis focuses on unaccompanied LGBTQ+ youth—those not residing with family members, parents, or guardians – ages 13-24.

Finally, we strategically use the terms LGBTQ+ or queer interchangeably throughout our article as umbrella terms to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals.

## **LGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing Homeless, Risks Factors, and Social Service Utilization**

LGBTQ+ youth are coming out at younger ages than in previous generations, more and more in adolescence and early adulthood,<sup>7,8</sup> potentially reflecting shifts in societal acceptance and attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people.<sup>9,10</sup> However, societal acceptance does not merit familial approval or that queer youth feel safe in their households. Therefore, despite positive shifts in contemporary society, LGBTQ+ youth have greater odds of running away from home.<sup>11</sup> Queer unhoused youth report incidences of familial conflict, abuse, rejection, neglect, and lack of acceptance of sexual orientation or gender identity<sup>9,12</sup> as facilitating factors for leaving their family home.<sup>13,14</sup>

Among queer youth, 28% report experiencing homelessness or housing instability at some point in their lives<sup>15</sup> and experience elevated incidences of victimization associated with being unhoused including incidences of prejudice, mistreatment, and exploitation.<sup>16</sup> LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience unaccompanied incidences of homelessness and have longer periods of homelessness when compared to their non-LGBTQ peers.<sup>14,17</sup> Moreover, LGBTQ youth who reported housing instability or homelessness have greater odds of reporting depression, anxiety, self-harm, considering suicide, and attempting suicide compared to those who did not report any housing instability.<sup>13-15</sup>

When LGBTQ+ youth are unable to reside in their family homes or lack safe places to live, their most commonly cited need is housing.<sup>14</sup> Social barriers exist to utilizing housing services as many agencies have cissexist heteronormative policies that contribute to LGBTQ+ anxieties.<sup>18</sup> Research finds that LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to seek out services like mental health care support than their cisgender heterosexual peers,<sup>19</sup> but access to services is uniquely challenging for LGBTQ+ youth, due in part, to cissexist heteronormative structures embedded in administrative protocols.<sup>1</sup>

Such dichotomies indicate inherent structural inequities in social service utilization, meaning that disparities in access are likely more the product of administrative barriers to accessing services

and not so much due to individual motivations. For example, housing services —like shelters — are often segregated based on population age and sex. They require individuals to fill out intake forms or to show legal forms of identification in order to gain admittance. For trans and non-binary people in particular, filling out such administrative forms or sharing legal identification (ID) that reflect their sex assigned at birth rather than how they identify can be distressing.<sup>20</sup> However, making necessary changes to government issued IDs—like driver’s licenses and state IDs—is often impeded by state policies and politics. Indeed, in Delaware, compared to its surrounding states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland, provider certification is required to make changes to gender markers on driver’s licenses, and policy does not allow individuals to have gender markers outside of the male/female binary.<sup>21</sup> Without proper ID, service organizations may not accept individual’s gender identity, especially when identification reflects dead names (i.e., names given at birth no longer used by trans people) and sex assigned at birth. As a result, trans people may either be denied access or placed with a population that is unsafe or traumatizing to them. According to a report produced by Canavan & Ledger,<sup>22</sup> 30% of trans people reported being turned away from a shelter due to their gender identity and 22% reported being sexually assaulted by fellow shelter residents or staff,<sup>22</sup> trans girls and women disproportionately experience assaults and violence.<sup>23</sup>

Exposure to unsafe environments are a more general problem for queer youth living without agency services and resources, or stable housing for reasons as diverse as gentrification, street violence, and police harassment.<sup>18</sup> This can make public spaces feel unsafe, resulting in avoidance of well lit, heavily populated places. In turn they increase their risk of physical harm, mistreatment, or abuse when seeking out places off the beaten path, like squats or unoccupied housing.<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that 48% of LGBTQ+ youth have stress around finding a place to sleep at night.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, research indicates that homeless LGBTQ+ young people have an increased likelihood of mental health problems and engaging in risky behaviors,<sup>1</sup> such as substance use and survival sex,<sup>24</sup> which are linked to increased incidences of negative health outcomes like HIV infection.<sup>1,25</sup> As a prerequisite to adequately serving this population, we need to have accurate assessments of the number and needs of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness.

## **Past Survey Work on LGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness**

There have been several national surveys examining the experiences of both young people and service providers. Across these tools, common practices include measuring the number of youths that are unhoused; collecting demographic information, health indicators, and histories of social service utilization; and acknowledging barriers to data collection, which are often marked by hard-to-reach populations and small sample sizes. Here we offer examples of surveys designed to collect inclusive information and accounts of youth’s experiences of homelessness across multiple states and communities.

Research, Education and Advocacy Co-Lab for Youth Stability and Thriving (REALYST) is a national research collaborative examining homelessness among young people aged 18 to 26 across seven major U.S. cities.<sup>26</sup> REALYST collaborators acknowledged that due to small sample sizes of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness, it is difficult to parse out a comprehensive, contemporary understanding of the range of experiences of young people and their day to day lives.<sup>27</sup> To address this need, *REALYST’s Homeless Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey* (HYRSS) captured the experiences of over 400 LGBTQ+ young adults between 2016 and 2017, gathering data on demographics, encounters with homelessness, and experiences with

stress and discrimination.<sup>27</sup> HRYSS assessed risk and protective factors concerning sexual health behaviors, mental health, technology and social media use, education, substance use, homelessness history, reproductive health, foster care history, criminal justice history, employment, adverse childhood experiences, victimization on the streets, coping, discrimination, and stress.<sup>21</sup> With these rich data, REALYST researchers were able to contrast differences in geographic locations to gauge variation in queer youth's experiences of homelessness across cities and communities. For example, researchers were able to assess the role social media plays in unhoused queer populations and the association between online interactions and youth's decisions to engage in risk or protective behaviors.<sup>27</sup> Which in turn holds major implications for how service organizations can design communication strategies around information dissemination and housing and health interventions. Moreover, the REALYST collaboration exemplifies how multiple research teams can create meaningful sample sizes and rich data by using matching survey tools across communities.

Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) is another initiative dedicated to capturing the experiences of queer unhoused youth. This national research initiative has four primary research activities designed to generate a more complete understanding of youth homelessness in the US—which includes counts and surveys.<sup>17</sup> For example, VoYC has offered the *VoYC Conducting a Youth Count: A Toolkit* since 2018, which offers a 5-phase roadmap to conduct an inclusive youth count of the homeless population in a given community or state. Phases 1-3 focus on organizing a team of collaborators, trainings, and conducting focus groups and phase 5 focuses on data analysis and dissemination.<sup>28</sup> Phase 4 is of particular interest as it provides steps, procedures, and tools to conduct actual counts of the youth homeless population in a given locality. Phase 4 employs a two-pronged approach: a street count guide for harder to reach populations that may be unwilling to be surveyed and the *VoYC Brief Survey*. The *VoYC Brief Survey* is a handy tool as it is purposely short—with a total of 16 questions on a single page—which may circumvent barriers associated with long, tasking surveys. The survey asks participants for demographic information, their initials instead of names, where they slept the previous night, education information, access to public benefits, foster care participation, histories of incarceration, whether they are pregnant or are a parent, and their sexual and gender identities,<sup>28</sup> allowing for an inclusive snapshot of youth experiencing homelessness.

VoYC also employed a national survey conducted in 2016 to estimate the incidence, prevalence of, and needs of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness -- resulting in a brief entitled *Missed Opportunities: LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in America*.<sup>17</sup> In this work, researchers surveyed 26,161 adults whose households had LGBTQ+ youth (ages 13-25) with histories of homelessness as well as queer respondents (ages 18-25) with histories of homelessness.<sup>29</sup> Collecting data by proxy, or by asking parents/guardians about their children and their lived experiences or asking individuals to recall past experiences in childhood is helpful as it allows researchers to circumvent institutional review boards' (or university ethics committees) lengthy approval periods associated with surveying protected classes, like those under the age of 18.<sup>29</sup> However, such strategies conflict with best practices recommended for reaching LGBTQ youth. That is, parental accounts or permissions often act as a barrier to the sexual, and presumably gender, minority participation in data collection and may create secondary narratives that are biased to the realities of LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>30</sup> However, secondary accounts and recalling past experience, while not ideal, do provide insights into facilitating factors of unaccompanied youth homelessness and past lived experiences.

Similarly, surveys that utilize the expertise of service providers help to unpack the needs and experiences of queer unhoused youth. Executing surveys at the provider level offers alternative avenues to data collection and insights to the diverse needs of this community as practitioners work with many youths in a variety of situations. For example, The True Colors Fund, in Partnership with the Williams Institute, gathered data from 138 youth homelessness service providers for the *2014 LGBTQ Homeless Youth Provider Survey*.<sup>14</sup> In this survey, providers reported information regarding the demographics, needs, and experiences of their clientele and reported on their own programs by detailing staff demographics and training, and barriers and successes to serving queer youth.<sup>14</sup> Findings indicate that over half of providers surveyed reported that they do not have dedicated LGBTQ staff, and providers cited lack of funding, community support, partnerships, and training as barriers to appropriately serving this population.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to homelessness-specific surveys, numerous organizations have performed surveys examining other aspects of this population, data from which we can glean further insight into disparities faced by queer youth across social service systems beyond housing. GLSEN, a national network of educators, students, and local chapters committed to safe, supportive, and inclusive K-12 education for LGBTQ+ youth, performs the *GLSEN School Climate Survey* bi-annually to gather data on LGBTQ+ youth in schools.<sup>31</sup> The Trevor Project, an American nonprofit organization focused on suicide prevention efforts for queer youth, conducts *the National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health* annually since 2019. The survey captures insights into novel risks LGBTQ+ youth face, barriers to mental health service use, and recently, the impacts of COVID-19 and anti-transgender legislation on queer youth, with nearly 34,000 respondents in 2022.<sup>15</sup>

There are also ongoing efforts to gather information on the lives of those that specifically identify as non-binary or transgender. The National Center for Transgender Equality, beginning in 2015 and surveyed again in 2022, launched the *U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS)*, which is the largest survey devoted to the lives and experiences of transgender people residing in the U.S.<sup>21</sup> USTS focuses on the experiences of trans people across systems (i.e., education, employment, health, housing, and law enforcement and the carceral system).<sup>32</sup> Results from the 2015 survey, which surveyed over 27,000 trans respondents, indicate that trans people face pervasive verbal, physical, and sexual violence in their lives in nearly every domain studied.<sup>32</sup> In terms of housing, 30% of respondents indicated that they had experienced homelessness at some point in their life due to their gender identity and 12% indicated that they had been unhoused in the year prior to taking the USTS.<sup>32</sup> Such results showcase how disparities in health and economic position permeate across systems due to individuals gender and sexual identities.

The United States government also makes efforts to collect data on the experiences of young people and have made small strides into becoming more inclusive of sexual minorities. For instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention created the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) in 1990 to biennially monitor behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence, unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol and substance use, dietary behaviors, and physical activity levels among representative samples of 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade students nationwide.<sup>33,34</sup> Notably in 2015 the YRBSS began to ask two questions on sexual identity, but as of 2022 still did not ask questions regarding youth gender identity. The YRBSS publishes reports specifically on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students, risk

behaviors, and health outcomes, however, findings are limited as they do not consider non-binary and trans youth.

National and local surveys are powerful tools. They highlight not only the number and needs of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness, but also the importance of spaces that offer acceptance of social identity, affirmation of individualism and emotional support. The True Color Fund's *2014 LGBTQ Homeless Youth Provider Survey* found that after housing support, acceptance and social support were the next highest needs identified by service providers for queer youth.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the next section defines and explores inclusive social services and programs afforded to unhoused queer youth throughout Delaware and the country as a whole.

## **Services Available to LGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness**

Homeless agencies and services refer to “public, community-based organizations dedicated or universal, specialized or not, involved in activities related to the homeless population....they are considered inclusive if they offer safe and stable accommodations for LGBTQ+ youth.”<sup>18</sup>

Currently, there are few organizations in Delaware specifically that meet these criteria and provide care for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. Among these is West End Neighborhood House's Life Lines Program which offers support to young people identifying as LGBTQ+, youth in foster care, and unaccompanied youth. Life Lines provides intensive case management including housing support, mental health services, employment placement assistance, and more.<sup>35</sup> Supporting the mission of West End Neighborhood House is the Delaware LGBTQ+ Housing Safeguard Committee. This committee is comprised of Delaware organizations committed to examining the current issue of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in the state and supporting those who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.<sup>36</sup> Youth experiencing homelessness may also utilize resources that are not LGBTQ+-specific such as the Housing Alliance Delaware, which provides a centralized intake program offering information and referrals to housing assistance and emergency shelter openings throughout the state.<sup>37</sup>

Across the state, there are several organizations connecting youth to resources and networks of their peers in order to meet social and emotional needs. Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) chapters throughout Delaware support several youth support groups, including the Parents of Trans Kids Youth Group for young people ages 10 to 21 and the LGBTQ+ “ASK” Youth Group designed for middle and high school youth.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, CAMP Rehoboth is a nonprofit organization with the goal of promoting community well-being and creating a positive and inclusive environment for people of all gender identities and sexual orientations. CAMP Rehoboth connects community members through events, education and outreach, fundraising, and providing political awareness.<sup>38</sup> Finally, Lavender Programming Board, a student-run organization at the University of Delaware that is open to the public, is dedicated to celebrating and connecting members of the LGBTQ+ community through meetings and social or informational events. By providing affirming spaces and access to community resources, organizations such as these are critical to the social and emotional development of young people, especially those experiencing homelessness.

Together with local resources, national services and policies have the potential to provide additional support for youth experiencing homelessness, including targeted resources for LGBTQ+ and other minoritized youth. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has committed to providing specialized services through the 988 Suicide & Crisis LifeLine. Queer youth who use the 988 Life Line have the option of being connected with a

specially trained, LGBTQ-competent mentor, providing potentially life-saving services for LGBTQ youth.<sup>15</sup> On a policy level, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvement Act of 2001, was implemented to support families and children who may move out of districts due to experiences of homelessness or those that do not have a stable address. The act aimed to prevent disruptions in schooling and maintain a consistent school environment.<sup>1</sup> McKinney-Vento assigns responsibility to schools to help provide transportation services, school supplies and uniforms to unhoused students.<sup>1</sup> However, this policy has shortcomings when youth are unaccompanied and unhoused as the age of majority is 18 and enrollment in such programs may require parent or legal guardians.

## Discussion

In order to adequately count LGBTQ+ unhoused youth in Delaware and assess their needs, our next steps are informed by research on youth homelessness across the country – e.g., LGBTQ+ homelessness research projects and data collection strategies -- and identified limitations in LGBTQ+ homelessness resources. For example, REALYST and VoYC provide exemplary projects with possible templates for a statewide assessment of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, where multiple strategies may be necessary for a surveillance of issues in both depth and breadth. For instance, *VoYC's Brief Survey* achieved a brief understanding of queer youth's social service utilization, identity, and needs through strategic data collection that included observations over time, confidential, deidentified data collection, discretion and privacy for participants, and resources for field-based street counting. The REALYST collective on the other hand has a more involved and lengthy survey to gauge the number, needs, and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. Their findings offered researchers and community leaders' evidence of youth awareness and use of services for people experiencing homelessness and possible intervention strategies. These surveys taken together garner new insights into the number and needs of the youth homeless population, specifically LGBTQ+ youth, through varying strategies in data collection- like a brief survey, field training guides, and metrics for anonymity—like the use of initials.

Furthermore, our documentation of national and local Delaware support services not only provides potential entry points for connecting with LGBTQ+ youth and specific resources to investigate service utilization and awareness, but also an understanding of the current service landscape. Throughout this work, we note that not all housing services or social programs extend support to unhoused queer youth or offer sexual and/or gender affirming support.<sup>18</sup> We find that there are a limited number of service providers and organizations geared toward the LGBTQ+ population in DE and those that offer a safe place to land for such individuals may not have the resources or staff to support this population. Moreover, policy designed to provide social services to enhance stability in childhood—like healthcare and education—do not consider unaccompanied youth and their needs. In the United States the age of majority is 18, thereby making unaccompanied youth ineligible for many services when a parent or guardian is not in their lives to provide support.

Finally, while the PIT and NCHE estimates offer an insight into the number of youth experiencing homelessness in DE, it is clear there is not an understanding of the true number of unaccompanied LGBTQ+ youth. Our analysis of existing work exemplifies that beyond enumeration, it is imperative to assess the scope of need of this population, especially as queer youth are exposed to greater risks to their physical, mental, and emotional health and personal



well-being.<sup>13,14</sup> Finally, when considering next steps for data collection and identifying priorities with queer youth in Delaware, research evidence provides impetus to also investigate precursors to LGBTQ+ youth homelessness (e.g., family rejection, childhood experiences of adversity), health correlates of homelessness (e.g., unhealthy substance use, mental health), and potentially elevated experiences of victimization and discrimination.

## Conclusion

This brief literature review is the first, evidence-building process needed to gauge the number, needs, and experiences of unaccompanied unhoused LGBTQ+ youth in Delaware. We have identified past approaches in survey work and enumeration, but to truly understand if these approaches work with Delaware's queer youth population – especially with Delaware's large Urban-Rural divide – we propose a series of informational focus groups. Focus groups should consist of LGBTQ+ individuals with lived experiences of homelessness in youth as well as service providers who may be privy to the unique needs of this population. We propose forming multiple groups throughout the state to address the varying topography of the Delaware and the resultant unique needs faced in different locations. Moreover, the focus groups would explore what we have learned in our review around facilitating factors to becoming an unaccompanied youth, lived experiences of being unhoused, how youth come to know about and access social services, and unmet needs and barriers to care. Through understandings provided by service providers as well as those with lived experiences, we will be able to determine which survey tools and questions are most appropriate to survey and count the number of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness throughout the state.

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