

STUDENT HOMELESSNESS: LESSONS FROM THE YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

Part III: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Equity: Disproportionality and Action Steps for Schools

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The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) was first developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 1990 to assess the health risk behaviors of youth and adults in the United States. For the 2017 survey administration, two optional questions about homelessness were added to the survey, with 17 states responding to those optional questions. In 2019, 27 states responded to the optional questions. The 2021 standard questionnaire will, for the first time, include one question about homelessness. States will also have the opportunity to choose an additional optional question. SchoolHouse Connection analyzed demographic and risk factor data from the YRBS in 27 states [i], comparing high school students experiencing homelessness and those not experiencing homelessness. This series shares the striking and heartbreaking results of that analysis, with tangible action steps schools can take to promote safety and health for students experiencing homelessness.

SchoolHouse Connection's analysis of YRBS data found that high school students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning (LGBQ) are disproportionately likely to experience homelessness, with 28.7% of students experiencing homelessness identifying as LGBQ, compared to 15.6% of all students.

For the first time, the YRBS survey results contained enough data to report about students who identify as transgender, revealing that transgender students are 9.22 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers.

THE METHODOLOGY

The YRBS utilizes a two-stage cluster sample design to generate a representative sample of high school students across various states. Schools were selected with probability proportional to school district enrollment size and representative classrooms were then randomly selected. Each state met the CDC requirement for overall response rate of at least 60% for using population weighted data. The weighting was adjusted for non-response rates and for students' grades, gender, race, and ethnicity. More information about the sample procedure and weighting process, as well as the data that support the findings of this study, are available publicly on the [CDC website](#). All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Version 27 and R Studio 1.4.1103. All prevalence rates and tests of significance were calculated using weighted data.

LIKELIHOOD TO EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS

LGBQ high school students



2.18 TIMES

compared to heterosexual high school students



Data: All the numbers are from SchoolHouse Connection's analysis of 2019 YRBS data from 27 states (AK, AR, CA, CO, CT, DE, HI, ID, IL, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MI, MT, NH, NM, NC, ND, PA, RI, SC, SD, VT, VA, WI).

These data mean that LGBQ high school students are 2.18 times more likely to experience homelessness than heterosexual high school students.

LIKELIHOOD TO EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS

Transgender high school students



9.22 TIMES

compared to non-transgender/cisgender high school students



Data: All the numbers are from SchoolHouse Connection's analysis of 2019 YRBS data from 27 states (AK, AR, CA, CO, CT, DE, HI, ID, IL, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MI, MT, NH, NM, NC, ND, PA, RI, SC, SD, VT, VA, WI).

YRBS homelessness data include high school students who experience homelessness as part of families, as well as those who are homeless by themselves. While the data do not establish the reasons for a student's homelessness, they clearly demonstrate a disproportionate likelihood that LGBQ high school students will experience homelessness. Studies of unaccompanied homeless youth that also include young adults have found similar disproportionalities for LGBTQ youth.

Identifying as LGBTQ+ can carry its own set of challenges and risk factors; for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, the challenges are compounded. For example:

- LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness miss school at twice the rate of their heterosexual housed peers
- Transgender students experiencing homelessness report experiencing forced sexual activities at three times the rate of their cisgender peers experiencing homelessness
- LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness attempt suicide at 2-3 times the rate of their heterosexual/cisgender peers
- LGBTQ youth are more likely to be bullied on school property

In schools, equity and safety for all LGBTQ students, including those who experience homelessness, requires a deliberate, district-wide commitment over time.

LYRIC, an LGBTQ youth organization in San Francisco, runs a successful school transformation program, demonstrating how schools and LGBTQ organizations can partner to improve school climate and reduce bullying. At Horace Mann Middle School and Balboa High School, students participated in a year-long regular school day Social Justice Course exploring justice, culture, identity, and diversity through an LGBTQ lens. Each participating youth was assessed for LGBTQ youth risk factors and provided access to individualized case management and weekly lunchtime support/discussion groups. Course-enrolled students formed a peer-based leadership team—engaging peers around LGBTQ inclusion, leading activities and events for all students throughout the school year, and promoting LGBTQ visibility and inclusion throughout the school community. Students and staff reported reduced harassment and bullying, improved safety, and enhanced school connectivity.

ACTION STEPS FOR SCHOOLS

1. Ensure that strong anti-bullying policies and practices are in place and respected.
2. Locate LGBTQ organizations in your community and invite them to lead trainings at school, consult on district policies and practices, and provide guidance on curricula and extra-curricular opportunities that respect and elevate the experiences of LGBTQ students.
3. Prioritize creating a positive school climate for the district. Provide ongoing training, coaching, and support for all school staff to build a positive school climate, including topics such as gender identity, cultural competency, and empathy. Ensure that these efforts accommodate the harsh reality of students experiencing homelessness.

4. Engage LGBTQ youth in school climate and equity efforts. Ask them for help spreading the word about McKinney-Vento services.

5. Ensure that the McKinney-Vento homeless liaison has adequate time and capacity to participate in school climate training and to collaborate with community agencies that provide food, health and mental health care, transportation, and housing, to meet students' needs outside of school. These added services help show students they are valued by their school.

RESOURCES

- GLSEN, [National School Climate Survey](#).
- GLSEN, [Tools for Student Organizers](#).
- Lambda Legal, [Working with Homeless LGBTQ Youth](#).
- StopBullying.Gov, [Creating a Safe Environment for LGBTQ Youth](#).
- StopBullying.Gov, [Bullying of LGBT Youth and Those Perceived to Have Different Sexual Orientations](#).
- True Colors United, [At the Intersections](#).