

I Am The Same Kid As Yesterday: Youth Homelessness and Sexual Orientation

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Abstract

Research suggests a correlation between homelessness and sexual orientation among youth. What factors lead to the overrepresentation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) youth among the general population of homeless youth? The core problem for youth who are forced out of their home is that they cannot financially support themselves and have an increased chance of becoming homeless. Homelessness may encourage youth to engage in dangerous behaviors. Past research has taken quantitative data from surveys but this sort of research does not provide accounts of people's experiences. By conducting personal interviews this project will gain a greater understanding of people's personal stories of becoming homeless as well as identify where they went to seek assistance.

Aim

To gain an understanding of the circumstances under which (LGBT) people became homeless in their youth in Anchorage. What was their perception about community resources that were available to them and did they access these resources?

Introduction

As a kid I knew that I was different from my peers. As a teenager it was difficult for me to tell my parents who I truly was. I was afraid that I would not be allowed to live at home because they would feel shame and reject me as their son. During this time my closest friends were my support networks and they encouraged me to be honest and tell my parents. They also reassured me that I had a place to stay if my parents kicked me out.

Research suggests a strong correlation between sexual minorities and homelessness, particularly in youth (Corliss et al. 2011). Youth, who have disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents, either intentionally or accidentally, put themselves at risk, particularly if their family has strong oppositional views. Some families react with hostility. Reaction can be influenced by stigmatized attitudes in their social and cultural environments (Saewyc et al. 2006).

One of the primary risks for LGBT youth is that they are under the legal and financial control of their parents who provide them with food and shelter. A majority of these youth are unemployed (Walls, Kane, and Widneski 2009). A great number of those who work cannot work enough to support themselves while attending school.

Many LGBT youth have reported incidents of violence, and discrimination in school. Nearly one-third drop out from high school in order to escape the abusive treatment from their schoolmates (Lambda Legal 2003). In addition, a growing number of adolescents run away from home because of the feeling of rejection, isolation, or abuse at home (Rotheram et al. 1996).

A lot of LGBT adolescents are not as fortunate as I was. As a result, many LGBT youth become homeless. Homelessness among youth, defined as those between the ages of 16 and 19 years old, has become a substantial social problem. According to the Center for American Progress (2010), there are up to 2.8 million homeless American youth. LGBT youth make up 20% of homeless youth, a large over-representation as LGBT youth only makes up 4-5 percent of the general population (Cianciotte and Sean 2003). Researchers previously thought that young people come out between the ages of 19 and 23. However, the average coming out age today is around 14-16 (Lehoczky 2005). Coincidentally, Tyler

and Beal (2010) found the average age at which LGBT youth run away is 14 and 15 years old, and most (LGBT) young people run 2 or 3 times. Many run away to escape abuse at home and school.

Many LGBT youth, unable to secure a steady job, end up on the streets, living with friends or couch surfing. For those who live on the streets the situation is grim. Life on the street is an extremely risky and dangerous situation for anyone. People who are homeless are more susceptible to violence and suicidal behavior (Corliss et al. 2011).

Suddenly becoming homeless can have lasting and detrimental effects on youth such as: having to engage in survival sex (this can lead to physical abuse as well as an increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases), suffering from depression, suicidal thoughts, and abusing drugs and alcohol (Rew et al. 2004; Walls and Potter 2009). Any of these situations makes it much harder for youth to get off the streets and break the cycle of homelessness.

There are organizations across the US that offer assistance to homeless adolescents, but only two percent of homeless youth have reported using these organizations. (Toro, Dworsky and Fowler 2007). LGBT homeless youth access these services less than the homeless youth population over-all but the reason for this is not well understood (Rew et al. 2004). An organization that specifically sets out to help (LGBT) homeless youth is the San Diego Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Community Center Youth Housing Project. The goal of this project is to get LGBT youth off the street (Henderson, 2007). Unfortunately, there is not a similar program in Anchorage that targets (LGBT) homeless youth.

Furthermore, LGBT youth are heavily marginalized by political decision and cultural norms in the US. Anchorage is a city that is heavily influenced by conservative values that have been in opposition to many LGBT issues. For example, the current Republican Mayor of Anchorage, Dan Sullivan, vetoed an anti-discrimination ordinance that would have protected LGBT people from being fired from their jobs or being denied housing because of their sexual orientation. This climate of intolerance may negatively affect LGBT youth in Anchorage but, in fact, little is known about the specific experiences of the Anchorage LGBT youth. Diane Blin (2011), Director of Program Services at Covenant House, Alaska, confirmed that there is a lack of research about the experiences of LGBT youth in Anchorage and is supportive of this research proposal. She also pointed out that LGBT youth do utilize their services and that programs have been tailored to deal with issues around sexual orientation.

For this research project I would like to interview 10 members of the LGBT population in the Municipality of Anchorage to determine the circumstances under which, they became homeless in their youth and if they accessed social services.

Project Design

I will conduct interviews with at least 10 members of the Anchorage LGBT community who experienced homelessness during their youth. I will only interview people 18 years old and older. The definition of homelessness that I am adopting for this study is from the McKinney – Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which defines homeless as “without a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (Corliss et al. 2011). I will start with a general question, which can lead to determining if circumstances at home influenced their homelessness. Specifically, this study will explore several questions

around their experiences of confronting or being confronted by their parents or guardians about their sexual orientation. Such questions as; how they came not to have a regular place to stay at night, were they asked or forced to leave their home or did they leave on their own accord, and if they were aware of or comfortable going to any of the shelters in the Municipality of Anchorage. I will seek participants who were homeless in their youth and are not older than 25 years old. The reason for the age limit is that I want to make some generalizations about services available in Anchorage and having too large an age span would make that difficult. I have already identified three members of the Anchorage LGBT community who are willing to participate in this study.

Research question

My overarching question is, what were and are the experiences of Anchorage LGBT adults who became homeless in their youth and what resources did they know were available to them? What kinds of support did they need that were not available?

Methodology

I will use a semi-structured interview guide. In addition to the interviews, I will collect basic demographic information such as age, gender, sex, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. I will recruit participants through snowball sampling, starting with the three LGBT community members who have agreed to participate. At the end of their interview I will ask the participant they know anyone else who might be willing to participate. In addition, I will attend meetings of the UAA and APU (LGBT) groups, “the family” and “spectrum” respectively, the Alaska AIDS Assistance Association (4 A’s), Covenant House, and Identity to recruit participants. I will put up flyers around the

UAA and APU Campus, LGBT resource center, Covenant House, and Beans Café. I will call the Gay Straight Alliances at each Anchorage High School and tell them about my research and see if they know of any people who are over 18 that would be interested in participating in this study. I will stop recruiting when I have 10 interviews scheduled.

Anticipated results

I anticipate that the people who I interview will report that family circumstances were a significant factor in them becoming homeless. I anticipate that respondents will be aware of few community programs that they could have gone to in order to avoid being homeless. I anticipate that most LGBT youth in Anchorage have social connections or networks that helped them from being permanently homeless and that they depended on these more than on community programs.

Limitations

This is a small pilot study and the results may not be representative of the experiences of LGBT youth in Anchorage in general.

Budget

Detail	Cost	Justification
Air Travel (Anchorage – San Diego, March 22-25 th)	\$815. 70 (Alaska Airlines)	I have been accepted to present a research poster at the Pacific Sociological Association about this research project. (Appendix C)
Conference Registration	\$20	
Transcription of	\$1.60 per minute of	I will have the interviews

Interviews (Using GMR Transcription Services)	recorded audio. (30 minutes. per interview \$48) 10 interviews \$480	professionally transcribed. This will give me more time to code and analyze data.
Atlas Data Analysis Software	Student Edition \$99.00	Software I will use to code the data
Windows 7	\$159.99	I have a MacBook and Atlas will not run without a PC platform. I will need to purchase a copy of Windows in order to run it.
Starbucks Gift Cards for participants	10 participants X \$10 \$100	I will offer the participants a gift card to thank them for participating
Stationary (Pens, note pads, etc.)	\$50	
Digital Recorder (Sony ICD PX 312	\$47	I need to record the interviews
Total	\$1771.69	

Timeline

January:

- Submit project to IRB for approval.
- *Week Ending (W/E) 21/12* Have meeting with faculty mentor to solidify research schedule. Confirm flyer design and make copies. Obtain needed supplies. Confirm with "the Family", "Spectrum", "Identity", "4 A's", "Gay Straight Alliances" and "Covenant House" about coming to speak to their members in order to recruit participants.
- *W/E (28/12)* Conduct 1 interview (30 minutes). Set up a tutorial for Atlas Software.

February:

- *W/E (04/12)* Conduct 2 interviews (30 minutes each). Have meeting with faculty mentor to go over project update. Work on research poster for the Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meeting.
- *W/E (11/12)* Conduct 2 interviews (30 minutes each). Continue work on research poster.
- *W/E (18/12)* Conduct 2 interviews (30 minutes each). Continue work on research poster.
- *W/E (25/12)* Conduct 2 interviews (30 minutes each). Have a debriefing with faculty mentor. Have poster completed and sent in for printing.

March:

- W/E (03/12) Conduct last interview (30 minutes each). Send interviews to be transcribed.
- W/E (10/12) Prepare for Pacific Sociological Association Conference in San Diego. Review Transcribed interviews.
- W/E (17/12) Spring Break
- W/E (24/12) Conference
- W/E (31/12) Work on coding interviews and data analysis

April:

- W/E (07/12) Have a debriefing with faculty mentor, continue work on coding and data analysis.
- W/E (14/12) Finalize findings and start writing up final report.
- W/E (21/12) Finalize final report and prepare for Undergraduate Research Symposium.

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Appendix A
Anchorage LGBT Homeless Youth Study
Interview Questions

Did you have a time before you were an adult when you experienced living without a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence? (If yes, was this in Anchorage?)

Can you describe the circumstances that led to you living without a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence?

Potential follow up questions: (What promoted this? Was it your parents finding out about your sexual orientation? Was it accidental or did you tell them? Do you know what their motivations were?)

What are your parent's political affiliations?

Where did you stay?

Where did you go?

Did you have friends or other family member that you could turn to?

Were there community resources in Anchorage that would provide support for you?

Did you utilize these resources?

If not, why? If yes, which ones?

In your ideal world what would you like to see in place for people who experience similar situations as you have or did?

Are you aware of other people who have experienced a similar situation as yours? (Other possible contacts?)

Demographic Form

1. Which of the following best describes you? Please indicate (circle).

Heterosexual (straight)

Gay or Lesbian

Bisexual

Not sure

2. During your life, the person(s) with whom you have had sexual contact is (are). Please indicate (circle).

I have not had sexual contact

Females

Males

Females and Males

3. In what range is your age? Please indicate (circle).

18-25

26-35

36-45

46-55

56-65

66 or higher

4. What is your gender? Please indicate (circle).

Male

Female

Transgender

Prefer not to disclose

5. What is your ethnicity? Please indicate (circle).

African American

Caucasian

Asian/Pacific-Islander

Hispanic

Native American/Alaskan Native

Multiracial

Other (please specify): _____

Appendix B

Draft Consent Form

Description:

You are being asked to participate in a one-on-one interview. The purpose of this study is to understand the connection between sexual orientation and living without a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence and to determine what resources are available within the municipality of Anchorage. If you agree to participate, you will take part in a 30-minute interview.

Voluntary Nature of Participation:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may stop at any time and you do not have to answer any questions you don't want to. Nothing will happen to you if you choose not to answer any questions or if you decide not to participate.

Confidentiality:

Your responses in the interview will be confidential. I would like to record the interview on my computer to ensure that my notes are accurate. However, only I will have access to the complete interview, write-up, notes, and recording. These files will be kept in a secure file cabinet in my office to which I only have access. The recordings will be kept on a password-protected computer. All records will be shredded or deleted after 3 years. Data will be compiled in such a way that you cannot be identified. I will not attach your name, address, or any other identifiable information about you to any of your responses, or to any reports or publication describing the results of this study.

Potential Risks and Benefits

Your participation in this study requires a commitment of time on your part. There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this survey. However, if you decide to participate, your willingness to share your experiences and knowledge may provide valuable insight for improving the resources for people who experience a time without a fixed, regular, adequate nighttime residence. You will be \$10 Starbucks gift card in appreciation for your time. There are no known risks to you as a result of your participation in this study. It is possible that the discussion of your personal experiences may make you feel uncomfortable at times.

Contact People

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Kent Spiers, project director at 830-3230 or kgspiers@alaska.edu. If you have any question about your rights as a research participant contact Dr. Nelta Edwards in the department of sociology at the University of Alaska Anchorage at 907-786-4654.

Signature

Your signature below means that you have read the information above and agree to participate in this study. If you have any question, please feel free to ask me now or at any time during the study.

Signature_____ Date_____

Print Name_____ Researcher's signature_____

A copy of this consent is attached for you to keep.