

## Recent Report Sheds Light on LGBT Homeless Youth

A 2006 report titled, "An Epidemic of Homelessness," by Nicholas Ray cites a study in which "50 percent of homeless youth...considered it likely or very likely that they will someday test positive for HIV." This report was published by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless.

This report estimates that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth make up 20 to 40 percent of all homeless youth in the United States. As New York City is the epicenter of HIV/AIDS and has significant homeless and LGBT populations, this information is highly relevant both to SMART, Inc. in terms of policy and outreach, as well as to SMART Youth, which works with adolescents living with and affected by HIV/AIDS and those at high risk.

The report cites the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' estimated statistics that the number of homeless and runaway youth ranges from approximately 500,000 to 1.5 million each year. While this particular report does not specifically focus on HIV/AIDS or New York City, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force estimates that there are between 15,000 and 20,000 homeless youth in New York City, of whom 3,000 to 8,000 are LGBT.

"An Epidemic of Homelessness" explains that while all homeless youth face a number of critical issues, these issues may be compounded for LGBT youth. Research suggests that many adolescents who reveal their sexual identity or changing gender identity to their families are expelled from their homes or face violence and thus runaway or become homeless. Indeed, family conflict is the most significant factor leading to homelessness for all youth, according to the report.

Perhaps due to sexual orientation-based or gender-based stigma and marginalization, LGBT homeless youth often face serious mental health issues. Due to stressors and family history, homeless LGBT youth also have a higher propensity to turn to alcohol and drugs, perhaps as a coping strategy. "An Epidemic of Homelessness" cites a Minnesota study which found that "between 10 and 20 percent of homeless youth *self-identify* as chemically dependent."

The report explains that in survival mode, some homeless youth will turn to sex work or "survival sex" to meet their basic needs such as shelter, food and money and that LGBT homeless youth are more likely to do so. This puts these youth at high risk for sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS: "According to New York City-based research cited in *The New York Times*, an individual experiencing homelessness was seven times as likely as other New Yorkers to die from AIDS [and] 16 times as likely to be diagnosed with HIV... Substance use, unprotected sex with any number of sex partners, and exposure to STIs and HIV makes homeless LGBT youth more susceptible to further negative outcomes." Further, according to the report, "lesbian and gay youth may have a harder time negotiating condom use with a partner." Transgender youth face a host of additional challenges compared to their lesbian, gay and bisexual peers and research cites higher reports of sex work and HIV/AIDS.

"An Epidemic of Homelessness" calls for more federal funding to address both homeless youth in general and LGBT homeless youth specifically, especially in order to provide "safe and effective services," and calls for a host of federal, state, local and practitioner-level recommendations to best meet the needs of this population.

If you are interested in learning more about this population or this topic impacts you, please refer to the list of local and national resources on page 3. ~CM

Source: Ray, N. (2006). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness*. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless.