

Public Libraries: Creating Safe Spaces for Homeless LGBTQ Youth

Julie Ann Winkelstein

School of Information Sciences, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, United States.
jwinkels@utk.edu



Copyright © 2014 by Julie Ann Winkelstein. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

Abstract:

“We must create a home for our LGBT youth. This home is an inner and outer dwelling where life is understood and respected in a safe place within mainstream culture” (Goldman, 2008, Introduction, p.xxvii).

The numbers of homeless youth in the United States are daunting. According to the Center for American Progress, as of June 21, 2010, there were approximately 1.6 million to 2.8 million homeless 12 to 24-year-olds in the United States. Of these, it is estimated that 20 to 40% are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQ), compared to an estimated 5 to 10% of the overall youth population - obviously a disproportionate number. This percentage means that at least 320,000 to 400,000 LGBTQ youth face homelessness each year.

The topic of LGBTQ youth homelessness and public libraries is a complex one. These young people are triply challenged: They are young, they are homeless and they identify as LGBTQ. To truly understand their needs, all three of these aspects must be considered.

Keywords: LGBT, youth, homeless, public libraries, USA

Public Libraries

Most U.S. public libraries are designed to accommodate and serve a domiciled, able-bodied, heterosexual, English-speaking, and literate public, capable of reading the signs, using the computers, staying awake, arriving showered and well-fed, and interested primarily in the programs and materials that support their domiciled family lives. It should not be a surprise that public libraries are like this because they are created, supported and staffed by those who belong to this same group.

One result of this is the social exclusion of various groups of people, such as homeless LGBTQ youth. The impact social exclusion has on this group has been well documented by

those who have observed and interviewed them, and includes risky behavior, low self-esteem, suicide ideation and depression.

Ironically, however, homeless LGBTQ youth, unlike visibly homeless adults, are able to “pass” as domiciled and perhaps even straight or gender-conforming. For instance, passing as domiciled was one of the goals of Cedar, a homeless gay teenager. Cedar explained that, though he loved using the library, he did not go every day:

That’s my biggest thing - I shower every day, brush my teeth every day, try to have good hygiene, try to look presentable, but if you see me on a day-to-day basis it’s hard, because I wear the same thing. So I try not to come here [the library] every day and so I would be surprised if anybody here knew I was homeless.

The ability to pass allows LGBTQ homeless youth to find sanctuary in a library or other public space away from the rigors of street life, but it also adds to their isolation by effectively hiding their identities.

In addition, this invisibility makes it extremely challenging for those outside their social sphere, such as public librarians, to provide relevant and critical resources. The youth and the librarians are at cross-purposes: The youth are hiding who they are and the librarians need to know more so they can offer help. The irony of this is that although in some ways this passing makes their lives more tolerable, in the long run it contributes to their exclusion, by keeping them hidden and shutting them off from possible allies.

LGBTQ Youth

“Surviving queer, no matter how invisible, often requires knowing how to travel across hostile territory - whether it be physical, emotional, cultural or theoretical.” (Ingram, 1997, p.27)

The topic of LGBTQ youth homelessness and public libraries is a complex one. These young people are triply challenged: They are young, they are homeless and they identify as LGBTQ. To truly understand their needs, all three of these aspects must be considered.

LGBTQ youth - and adults - have historically been considered as “other” in a society that is reluctant to accept and embrace perceived differences. This othering and the effect it has on youth in particular plays a large part in the lives of the LGBTQ homeless youth, and some understanding of what it means and how it happens may help to shed light on the challenges they face every day.

The next section offers some statistics as one way to gain insight into these challenges. However, these statistics do not *define* them. Sexual minority youth are put at risk by the behavior of others, not themselves. That is, it is a lack of acceptance that makes them a vulnerable population, not their sexual orientations or gender identities. So these statistics serve not as a description or summary of their lives, but instead as indicators of the work society in general needs to do to reduce the risks to LGBTQ homeless youth and to allow each one of them to be proud of who they are and what they can contribute.

The Numbers

The Phoenix chapter of PFLAG - Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning People - offers an information sheet called “Today’s Gay Youth: The Ugly, Frightening Statistics” (n.d.). Some examples include:

- Suicide is the leading cause of death among gay and lesbian youth.
- Approximately 28% of gay and lesbian youth drop out of high school because of discomfort (due to verbal and physical abuse) in the school environment.
- Gay students hear anti-gay slurs as often as 26 times each day; faculty intervention occurs in only about 3% of those cases.
- Gays and lesbians are the most frequent victims of hate crimes.
- Approximately 40% of homeless youth are identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual.
- In a study of male teenagers self-described as gay or bisexual, 27% moved away from home because of conflict with family members over sexual orientation.

The last two bullet points are examples of the many statistics and stories about homeless LGBTQ youth. The next section addresses this issue in particular.

Homeless LGBTQ youth

“No one ever told me that being strong is by starting from nowhere and having nothing” (Cupid & Dija, 2010).

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2010), “unaccompanied homeless youth are defined as youth ages 12 to 24 with no familial support or permanent residency.” In addition: “The number one reason that GLBT youth become homeless is family conflict,” often created by the teen’s disclosure of sexual orientation (Ray, 2006). Once the youth are on the streets, their lives can be challenging. As Ray (2006) explains, homeless LGBTQ youth “typically sleep in shelters, public spaces, abandoned buildings, cars, or outside...and some will be exploited by adults and exchange sex for a place to stay.”

Much of the literature about homeless LGBTQ youth is included in the studies on homeless youth in general. For example, *Voices from the Street: A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers* (2008) provides a broad range of insights into the lives of homeless youth. Challenges listed in this report include:

- Thirty percent of youth had spent the previous night outdoors, on the street, or in a car or vacant building.
- The majority (over 75 percent) reported negative and regular interactions with the police. One prominent reason for this was being ticketed for offenses such as sleeping on the street and being unable to pay the fines, resulting in criminal records, which impede their efforts to find employment and housing.
- Despite the reality that homeless youth are frequently the *victims* of crime while on the streets, not a single respondent described turning to police for help or reporting being victimized.
- Only seven percent were runaways, in the sense of having left home by choice.
- When asked how they thought others perceived them, homeless young people reported being perceived as, or called, “lazy, bad kid, bum, troublemaker, lowlife, piece of s—, scumbag, junkie, whore, gangbanger, the lowest of the low, and worthless.”
- Over thirty percent said their major challenges were finding affordable housing and a job

Other challenges from this same report are:

Finding information, lack of credit history, lack of ID and other documents, a criminal record, discrimination, lack of transportation, pet ownership, lack of self-confidence, finding childcare, difficulty in leaving other homeless friends behind, drug addiction, poor decision-making, harassment by law enforcement, mental illness, immigration status, and lack of money generally. (Bernstein and Foster, 2008, p.39)

This report is one of many resources that can offer background, statistics, recommended resources and other information that could aid public librarians in understanding LGBTQ homeless youth and how to provide relevant services to them.

Needs of Homeless LGBTQ Youth

“Homeless people seek more than food and shelter. Such basic needs are important. However, seeking friendship, support and community are equally important.” (Hodgetts, Radley, Chamberlain, and Hodgetts, 2007, p.716)

In addition to the information needs of any youth their age, employment and housing, as already mentioned, are high on the list of expressed needs, as are educational opportunities.

Also, many homeless youth need access to legal advice and legal documents, such as birth certificates and court orders. Transgender youth, in particular, need to know how and where to do the legal documentation changes, such as court orders, passports, social security, legal power of attorney, driver’s license or state identification card, wills, birth certificates and marriage licenses.

Additionally important is the need for a safe, secure and welcoming environment. Much of what these youth have experienced makes them suspicious and uncomfortable with adults in positions of authority and in bureaucracies in general. In many cases they have been ostracized, then shamed and blamed for their living situations. Caring adults, like librarians, who welcome and affirm who they are can make a significant difference in their lives and their ability to move beyond their current situations.

Public Libraries and Homelessness

“A library is not a community masturbation center. A library is not a porn parlor. A library is not a refuge for the homeless.” (Cronin, 2002)

Most of the literature relating to homelessness and public libraries focuses on homeless adults, primarily homeless individuals. The impetus for these articles is usually either a concern with managing their behavior in the library or a reaction to efforts to manage their behavior. Public conduct policies in particular target homeless adults by limiting the amount of baggage that can be carried into the library, by forbidding sleeping and by prohibiting the use of the public bathrooms for bathing. Other restrictions include either disallowing a library card for those without a permanent address or severely limiting the number of items that can be checked out. Odor policies, too, are enforced at some libraries, thereby denying library access to people who also have no way to take showers or who choose to remain unwashed to protect themselves on the streets.

It is interesting to note that while homeless LGBTQ youth are impacted by many of the public conduct policies in public libraries, the policies were not necessarily designed to target them. As previously noted, this is usually an invisible group and librarians are in most cases unaware of their presence in the library.

Homeless LGBTQ Youth and Public Librarians

The social relations formed between homeless LGBTQ youth and public librarians are created by numerous visible factors, such as collection choices, signage, attitude, programs, resources, outreach and the day-to-day human interactions between staff and library users. Whether or not a young person who identifies as LGBTQ and homeless feels welcome and supported in a public library is integral to serving them well. Because if the space itself communicates a negative or even disinterested message, the opportunity to provide library services to this young person is lost. Williams (1978) says it well: “In a simple sense we think of buildings as for shelter, for use inside in a simple way. We sometimes forget that buildings, particularly public buildings, very powerfully communicate social meanings and are intended to” (pp.71-72).

The *Community-Led Libraries Toolkit* (2008) provides excellent examples of this in its report on the “Working Together Project” (Working Together Project, 2008). This four-year project offered disengaged or underserved community members a chance to relate their library experiences, impressions and expectations. The resulting toolkit offers what they call “six key lessons”:

- Library culture, along with rules and procedures, create significant barriers to inclusion.
- Libraries must recognize that *same* or *consistent* customer service, which does not take into account socio-economic disparity, results in inequitable services that further disadvantage socially excluded people.
- Planning relevant and effective library services for socially excluded community members requires a collaboration of equals between the community members and the library.
- Relationship building is at the core of effective service planning.
- Staff “soft skills” such as empathy, interpersonal competence, and open-mindedness are essential.
- People want to see themselves represented in the library and to have an opportunity to participate. (p.8)

The listed key points lend support for public libraries to be actively engaged in improving the lives of homeless LGBTQ youth, since these young people certainly qualify as social excluded.

Serving Homeless LGBTQ Youth

“My mom kicked me out for being myself and she doesn’t even know who I am.” (Cedar, 2012)

Homeless LGBTQ youth are young people, many of them still teenagers. Their future should have been in easy reach as it is for most domiciled youth who live at home at their age or who

venture onto college campuses across the United States. Instead, due to circumstances over which they have no control, they are forced onto the streets or into temporary shelter, insecure about their futures.

To feel safe, these youth also need caring and respectful adults, like librarians, on their side, especially since many of these young people have had negative experiences with adults in power: Parents, teachers, foster parents, social workers, government agencies, store owners, even librarians. When an adult reaches out and makes a connection to homeless LGBTQ youth, that connection provides much-needed approval and acknowledgement. This relates to the comments made by the service provider, Sofia, when asked what she would like librarians to know about these youth:

They're young people and they're young people that really seek out adult approval, even though we don't necessarily see it or know it...They're used to being on the streets and asking for change and having people ignore them and ignore them and ignore them, or being kicked out of establishments, so I think it's just so important to kind of build this space where like they're not alienated and they're not ignored, and they're not kind of pushed to the sides...You know, ask questions and talk to them, and, yeah, offer them support in a kind and authentic way...I think that they're afraid that people are gonna judge them a lot, so they just kind of choose to be quiet and ignored.

When asked about barriers to library use by homeless youth Sofia put it like this:

I couldn't really see them approaching a librarian and saying like "Hey," like just asking questions or needing help...I think, in general, a lot of times they won't approach the staff at places because they're afraid. They don't want to draw attention to themselves. It's like "If I draw attention to myself, I'm gonna get kicked out," which is a valid fear, because they do. Like I said, they get kicked out all the time from places.

Feeling Safe

On the streets, in the shelters and in public spaces, such as libraries, the youth also maintain what Mallon (1998) calls “hyper-vigilance, i.e., the constant scanning of the environment for negative signals” (p.27). This vigilance helps them feel safer, and it also makes them aware of the attitudes of the library staff, the enforcement of conduct policies, such as no sleeping rules, and the presence of LGBTQ-affirming indicators, such as rainbow flag stickers and LGBTQ book collections.

One of the challenges in a public space, like a library, is making it safe for all who inhabit it, both the employees and the visitors. The choices that are made in how to do this can reflect the norms of society and the hegemony that controls those norms. As Laurenson and Collins (2007) say: “At least implicitly, the ‘public’ whose safety is to be improved is understood in narrow and exclusive terms, encompassing only those engaged in legitimate acts of production or consumption” (p.651). Because of this attitude, the decisions made about who is welcomed frequently determines who is not welcomed.

Suggestions

The following are suggestions. They are only the beginning, because for each library, service provider and homeless LGBTQ youth, the circumstances and personalities will be different.

- **Provide trainings.** Libraries can provide trainings to library staff regarding homelessness, LGBTQ questions and youth services for all staff. Trainers can come from outside agencies, such as social services, and could even include homeless LGBTQ youth themselves.
- **Attend meetings/create partnerships.** Most service providers will welcome librarians at their regular meetings, where they exchange ideas, create partnerships, commiserate, support each other, apply for funds and so on.
- **Subscribe to e-lists.** E-lists that are connected to the world of LGBTQ homeless youth provide weekly or monthly newsletters and announcements about relevant news. These offer a way to stay connected to a world that may be far different from the world of the librarian.
- **Offer a glossary of terms.** Create a list of the terms that apply to the lives of homeless LGBTQ youth. Posting such a list in the library can provide information, as well as a constant reminder of these young people.
- **Offer relevant resources.** Include books, DVDs, CDs, programs, speakers, workshops, and displays that relate to the lives of homeless LGBTQ youth. Since some of their needs overlap with those of housed library users, this can be an extension of current offerings. In addition, providing up-to-date resources about free showers, meals and shelters can show the library is aware and supportive of those experiencing homelessness.
- **Create a safe and welcoming environment.** Using signage, such as “Hate Free Zone” posters and rainbow stickers to create an environment that lets these young people know they are welcome and safe in the library.

Final Words

It is my hope that public librarians will find their way toward creating connections to homeless LGBTQ youth and those who care for them. As community spaces and purveyors of information, public libraries have the ability to improve the lives of these young people, while at the same time, creating invaluable partnerships and opportunities for the library itself.

References

- Bernstein, N., & Foster, L.K. (2008). *Voices from the street: A survey of homeless youth by their peers*. Sacramento, CA: California Research Bureau.
- Center for American Progress (2010, June 21). *Gay and transgender youth homelessness by the numbers*. Retrieved from http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/06/homelessness_numbers.html
- Cronin, B. (2002). What a library is not. *Library Journal*, 19, 46.
- Cupid & Dija (2010). Stories from the streets. In S. Lowery (Ed.), *Kicked Out* (pp.34-36). Ypsilanti, MI: Homofactus Press.
- Goldman, L. (2008). *Coming out, coming in: Nurturing the well-being and inclusion of gay*

- Hodgetts, D., Radley, A., Chamberlain, K., & Hodgetts, A. (2007). Health inequalities and homelessness: Considering material, spatial and relational dimensions. *Journal of Health Psychology, 12*, 709-725.
- Ingram, G.B. (1997). Marginality and the landscapes of erotic alien(n)nations. In G.B. Ingram, A.-M. Bouthillette, & Y. Retter (Eds.), *Queers in space: Communities/public spaces/sites of resistance* (pp.27-52). Seattle, WA: Bay Press.
- Laurenson, P., & Collins, D. (2007). Beyond punitive regulation? New Zealand local governments' responses to homelessness. *Antipode, 39*, 649-667.
- Mallon, G.P. (1998). *We don't exactly get the welcome wagon: The experiences of gay and lesbian adolescents in child welfare systems*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- National Alliance to End Homelessness (2010). A national approach to meeting the needs of LGBTQ homeless youth. *The Explainer*. Retrieved from www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/NationalApproach.pdf
- PFLAG Phoenix (n.d.). *Today's gay youth: The ugly frightening statistics*. Retrieved from http://www.pflagphoenix.org/education/youth_stats.html
- Ray, N. (2006). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness*. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless.
- Williams, R. (1978). The library's relation to the community. In Gerard, D. (Ed.), *Libraries in society*. London: Clive Bingley.
- Working Together Project (2008). *Community-led libraries toolkit: Starting us all down the path toward developing inclusive public libraries*. Retrieved from http://www.librariesincommunities.ca/resources/Community-Led_Libraries_Toolkit.pdf