



LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: WHAT WE KNOW

STATE OF KNOWLEDGE SHEET

15–34%

of foster care youth are LGBTQ+ compared to 10-15% in the general population.¹⁻⁵ LGB youth are **2.5 times** as likely to be in foster care as their heterosexual counterparts.⁶

55%

of LGBTQ+ youth removed from families nationwide are youth of color.⁷ In LA County, **nearly 94%** of LGBTQ+ youth in the foster care system are youth of color.¹ About **58%** of LGBTQAI+ NYC foster youth identify as African American and **44%** identify as Latinx.³

13.2%

of NYC foster youth identified in the trans spectrum.³ Research suggests trans and non-binary youth have higher odds of being represented in foster care than LGBQ or cisgender youth.^{1, 8}

LGBTQ+ youth* are disproportionately represented within the Child Welfare System (CWS). These inequities are even more pronounced among LGBTQ+ youth of color, trans, and nonbinary youth.

Health Justice Framework: We conceive of Health Justice for LGBTQ+ youth as involving the application of human rights principles to public health needs; moreover, human rights principles require guarantees of non-repetition of harms, which leads health justice approaches to seek system-level reforms. Another rights principle guides us to prioritize meaningful participation of the persons most affected by the inequity in seeking solutions.^{9, 10}

Factors Associated with CWS Inequities among LGBTQ+ Youth:

- **Anti-LGBTQ+ stigma** at school, home, and in general society increases emotional and behavioral problems in LGBTQ+ youth.¹¹⁻¹³ Family support makes a difference.¹⁴⁻¹⁷ However, **families may lack help they need in helping LGBTQ+ youth cope with stress in a healthy way.**¹⁸ This may lead to conflict and abuse or neglect.¹⁹
- **Maltreatment:** LGBQ youth are **twice as likely** as heterosexual youth to have experienced physical abuse prior to removal; this is even higher for trans and gender non-confirming youth,²⁰ who are almost four times more likely to have experienced abuse.²¹
- **Family rejection/conflict with caregivers** are key drivers of CWS involvement for LGBTQ+ youth, especially for transgender and nonbinary youth – **40% of transgender and nonbinary youth** in foster care reported being kicked out, abandoned, or needing to run away compared to **17% of cisgender LGB youth.**²²
- **LGBTQ+ youth have higher rates of mental health issues/substance use**, due to identity and stigma-related stress factors,^{13, 23, 24} as well as child maltreatment,²⁵⁻²⁷ poverty, structural racism, and family instability.¹⁹
- **Parents who feel ill-equipped** to deal with behavioral problems like substance use sometimes request CWS help for family preservation or supervision for youth with behavioral problems they cannot manage.²⁸ These youth and families require special help based on knowledge of healthy coping with LGBTQ+ stigma.
- **Families of color** are more likely to experience challenges like poverty, living in disinvested neighborhoods, lack of access to jobs and resourced and effective schools, and increased policing around suspicion of substance use,²⁹ etc. These factors can undermine family stability, further complicating the lives of LGBTQ+ youth of color and impacting likelihood of interaction with CWS.^{30, 31}
- **LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to be removed by the CWS** from their home for reported abuse and neglect and placed in foster care/group homes due to all these reasons. Due to implicit bias, LGBTQ+ youth of color are at even more likely to be removed by the CWS for these reasons.

*We use the term LGBTQ+ to be inclusive of the range of sexualities and genders. However, we want to acknowledge that not every study cited is comprehensive in how they define and include different identities. Therefore, the acronyms used in each citation correspond to the populations included in each study. We also use the term “youth” as an umbrella category to include individuals up to the age of 25. We acknowledge that the literature cited does not uniformly define the age range of “youth” in this manner.



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Lack of data and analysis on key questions due to **undercounting of LGBTQ+ youth within the CWS:**

- Many data collection systems **do not ask for SOGI** (sexual orientation and gender identity) information.^{32, 33} Systems that do collect this data rely on self-disclosure. Some youth and parents may hide this information out of fear of rejection or discrimination from CWS officials, family, or friends.
- **Lack of systematic data** collection among groups experiencing unique inequities and needs, including **trans and non-binary youth**.
- Limited data on how **immigration and nationality** affect pathways into child welfare for LGBTQ+ youth and **differences between documented and undocumented** LGBTQ+ immigrant youth in the CWS.
- **Lack of systematic data collection on youth involved in multiple systems** (e.g., CWS and juvenile justice) due to confidentiality laws and other factors.

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Recognize how the political, legal, and ethical context** at the federal and local levels may require special steps to manage threats to the safety, independence, and career progression of researchers; to ensure the integrity and proper use of research, recognizing in particular the importance of intersectional research and best-practice methods; and to protect the dignity and rights of affected populations within research and deployment of research strategies.
- **Improved SOGI Data Collection** – Better tracking of LGBTQ+ youth, distinguishing between subpopulations. CWS data collection systems should:
 - **Include SOGI and demographic questions** as well as important outcomes.
 - **Train CWS staff** to ensure clinically and culturally competent collection of accurate and complete data on LGBTQ+ youth and families.
 - Adopt and implement **nondiscrimination policies** and safe **mechanisms of reporting** to protect LGBTQ+ youth.
 - Within CWS intakes and research, include **confidential, anonymous mechanisms** for CWS-involved youth to respond to SOGI questions.
- **Better understand causes of and solutions for LGBTQ+ disparities in CWS.** More research is needed on:
 - How inequities among LGBT youth of color are influenced by **factors other than family rejection** such as poverty and lack of stable and equitable housing, education, and employment.
 - **Connections between school policies and paths to CWS involvement** among LGBTQ youth.
 - **Neighborhood-level drivers** for CWS involvement of LGBTQ youth of color.
 - **Effectiveness of programs** aimed at reducing LGBTQ+ disparities, particularly among high-risk subgroups such as youth of color, transgender, and non-binary youth.
 - **Large-scale, nationally representative samples** of LGBTQ youth in CWS to fill important gaps in data. Advocating for federally funded programs to require reporting on sexual orientation/gender identity of youth participants would be helpful.

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