

## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# SEXUAL & GENDER MINORITY YOUTH IN LOS ANGELES FOSTER CARE

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## INTRODUCTION

The Los Angeles County Child Welfare System has a duty to protect foster care youth from harm and to act in their best interests. In order for the system to fulfill its duty, there is a need to understand who is in the system and how different groups of youth may face unique challenges. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ), and other sexual and gender minority youth are one such group. At various points during their time in the child welfare system, LGBTQ youth interact with caseworkers, foster parents, congregate care facility employees, and other foster youth. In these interactions, LGBTQ youth may experience discrimination and stigma unique to their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression. However, an overall lack of systematic data collection on LGBTQ youth in foster care limits the ability of the child welfare system to address the unique challenges of this group.

For over three decades, research on adolescent demographic characteristics and behavior has been conducted via school-wide, state, or national surveys, many of which have included questions about sexual orientation. More recently, there have also been efforts to integrate measures of gender identity and expression into large scale surveys. Though past studies likely included youth in foster care, they did not specifically focus on foster care youth, nor did they include questions about dependency status. This makes it difficult to answer “How many youth in foster care are LGBTQ?” Similarly, while there has been research on the factors that may lead youth to enter or remain in foster care, such as family rejection or physical and verbal abuse, there is a lack of population-based research on the outcomes of those youth once they enter care. This makes it difficult to answer, “How are LGBTQ youth doing in foster care?”

This summary outlines the findings of the Los Angeles Foster Youth Survey (LAFYS), which represents a first

**“12.9% of LGBTQ youth report being treated poorly by the foster care system compared to 5.8% of non-LGBTQ youth.”**

step toward population-based data collection on LGBTQ foster youth. This data collection is valuable because it answers questions about whether LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in foster care and adds to the research on how sexual and gender minority youth face unique challenges compared to non LGBTQ youth. These data provide opportunities for policy makers and practitioners to make evidence-based decisions to allocate resources in ways that address the challenges of LGBTQ youth. This study also highlights some areas where further population-based research can be conducted with LGBTQ youth in foster care.

## LOS ANGELES FOSTER YOUTH SURVEY

In response to this need for data, researchers from the Williams Institute and Holarchy Consulting conducted the LAFYS, a telephone interview study with 786 randomly sampled youth ages 12-21 living in foster care in Los Angeles County. The LAFYS was a one-time study conducted as part of the RISE (Recognize Intervene Support Empower) Project, a five-year cooperative agreement awarded to the L.A. LGBT Center (The Center) by the federal Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII). PII is a 5-year, \$100 million, multi-site demonstration project designed to improve permanency outcomes among children in foster care who have the most serious barriers to permanency. PII includes six grantees, each with a unique intervention to help a

specific subgroup of children who leave foster care in fewer than three years. The goals of the LAFYS were:

- to accurately and confidentially assess the proportion of foster youth who identify as LGBTQ,
- to assess whether LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in foster care, and
- to help us understand the experiences of these foster youth within the child welfare system.

We collected information about a range of demographics, including sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. We also assessed youth’s experiences in foster care as they relate to risks to permanency and wellbeing, such as information on placements, homelessness, and schooling.

## FINDINGS

### How many.

Around 7,400 youth, ages 12-21, are in out-of-home care in Los Angeles County in any given month (LA-DCFS, 2014); **19% or about 1,400 of these youth identify as LGBTQ.**

### Characteristics.

The LGBTQ foster youth population in Los Angeles County has similar racial/ethnic and age demographics as the non-LGBTQ foster youth population. Thus,

**the majority of LGBTQ youth in the sample were youth of color.** Further, about 10% of LGBTQ youth reported being born outside of the U.S. and nearly one third had a biological mother or father that had been born outside of the U.S.

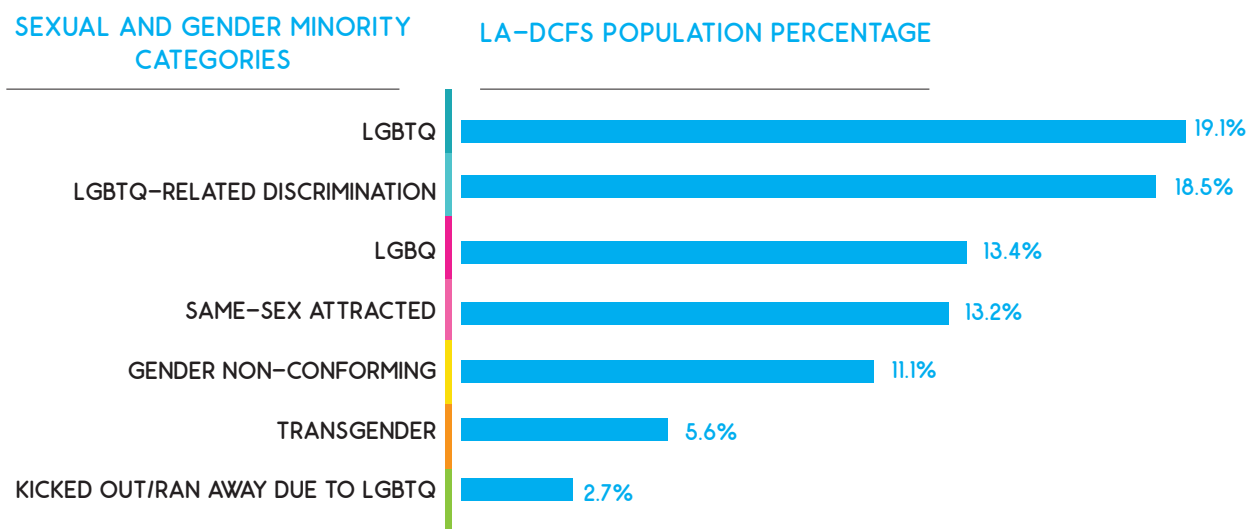
### Disproportionality.

13.6% of foster youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning, 13.2 % reported some level of same sex attraction, and 5.6% identify as transgender. This means that **there are between 1.5 to 2 times as many LGBTQ youth living in foster care as LGBTQ youth estimated to be living outside of foster care.**<sup>1-2</sup>

### Disparities in Experience.

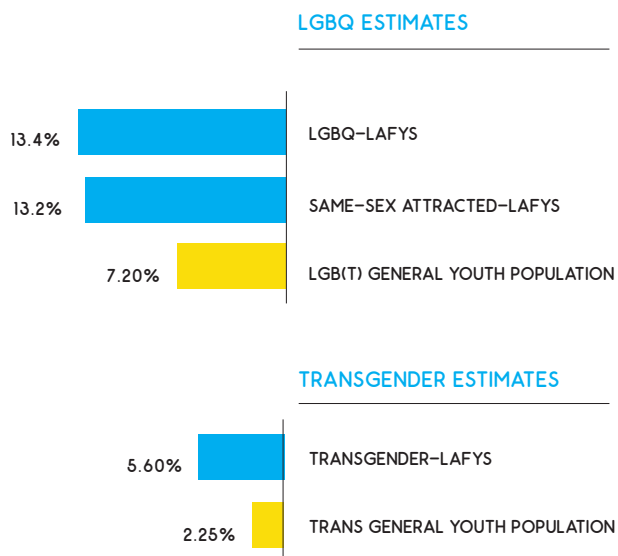
LGBTQ youth have a higher average number of foster care placements and are more likely to be living in a group home. They also reported being treated less well by the child welfare system, were more likely to have been hospitalized for emotional reasons at some point in their lifetime, and were more likely to have been homeless at some point in their life. The significance of these findings is supported by previous scholarship that has linked multiple placements, mental health concerns, homelessness, and placements in group homes are barriers to permanency faced by all youth, and LGBTQ youth in particular.<sup>3</sup>

**CHART 1. SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITY CATEGORIES OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE**



\*The total LGBTQ population estimate removes overlap created by respondents who fit more than one category.

**CHART 2. LGBTQ YOUTH ARE OVERREPRESENTED IN FOSTER CARE**



**IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS & CAREGIVERS**

Policy makers and caregivers can take steps to better understand the lives and unique challenges of the LGBTQ youth they serve.

**Data collection.**

Despite their overrepresentation among foster care youth, LGBTQ youth have been relatively invisible within the system because of barriers to disclosure and a lack of data collection. To address this:

- Integrate questions about sexual orientation, gender identity, gender conformity, and discriminatory experiences related to these social statuses into existing demographic data collection, intake, service planning and case review processes.
- Raise competencies of child welfare workers to collect this information respectfully and accurately prior to integrating these questions in systems.
- Make sure to maintain confidentiality when sharing and recording this information prior to integrating these questions in systems.

**Address oppressions.**

Improving permanency outcomes for LGBTQ youth requires a multi-pronged approach that examines how oppressions operate at structural and institutional levels

(e.g., within policies, families, public spaces, and organizations), as well as at the level of interpersonal and workforce interactions.

- Address LGBTQ competencies within the child welfare system workforce and among caregivers.
- Address the roles that racism, heterosexism, and anti-trans-bias play in creating disparities for LGBTQ youth in foster care.

**Cost Avoidance.**

LGBTQ youth in this sample were particularly overrepresented in group home settings, moved significantly more, and were hospitalized for emotional reasons at

**TABLE 1. LGBTQ YOUTH FACE UNIQUE BARRIERS TO PERMANENCY:**

BARRIERS TO PERMANENCY	LGBTQ	NON-LGBTQ
Total # of Placements [Mean(SD)]	2.85(1.1)	2.43(1.03)
Ever been hospitalized overnight	38.8%	31.2%
Hospitalization for emotional reasons	13.5%	4.2%
Ever been homeless	21.1%	13.9%
Live in a Group Home	25.7%	10.1%

a higher rate. This all means additional costs – higher rates paid for extensive group care stays and hospital stays, and additional administrative burden on staff when youth move.

- Address the needs of LGBTQ youth in care so their experience begins to approximate those of their non-LGBTQ counterparts. This will result in much needed cost avoidance for already over-burdened child welfare systems.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS**

More data on LGBTQ youth in foster care can lead to understanding how best to allocate resources to support youth. It can also increase the ability to make evidence-based requests of systems and programs to identify what is working and what is not working for the youth in care.

**Data collection.**

Future research should further refine methods used to

**TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHICS OF LGBTQ YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE:**

DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE	LGBTQ
Latino	54.6%
American Indian	3.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.9%
Black	28.5%
White	6.4%
Bi/multi-racial or ethnic	4.7%
Born out of U.S.	9.7%
One or both bio parents born out of U.S.	32.4%
Assigned Female at birth	61.4%
Assigned Male at birth	38.6%
Age in years	16.2 (1.7)

ask about sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression among foster care youth. This includes thinking about the best way to construct basic research procedures, like the ones used for this study. It also means collaborating with social services to assist in identifying ways to confidentially integrate sexual orientation and transgender status into public data systems, keeping in mind that a youth's sense of self is likely to shift throughout adolescence.

#### Linking case data.

This study has shown that LGBTQ-related questions can be asked of foster care youth as young as 12 years of age in a safe, private and non-stressful way. Counties, courts and academic review boards should allow linkage to case data of the participants. This would allow data systems to be used to understand far more information about the status, experience and outcomes of LGBTQ youth in foster care in combination with administrative data.

#### LGBTQ vs. Non-LGBTQ.

We need to know more about the ways that LGBTQ youth in foster care have different experiences than non-LGBTQ youth. Future studies should examine other details of youth's lives, such as:

- Conditions surrounding entry into care
- Permanency rates and differences in experience by placement setting
- Family relationships and family's reactions to LGBTQ or gender non-conforming youth
- How race, culture, sex, and gender interact to affect other relevant factors
- Identifying resiliency factors that allow some LGBTQ youth to thrive and transition out of foster care into permanency

#### Looking within LGBTQ.

More research needs to be done to examine the differences in experiences between L, G, B, T, and Q and how these experiences compare across gender and ethnic/racial groups. Also, not all gender non-conforming youth identified as LGBTQ, but many faced much of the same discrimination because rigid cultural norms around gender expression are tied to perceptions of sexual identity. Therefore, there is also a

need to study differences between gender expression and identity.

## METHODOLOGY

Initial drafts of the LAFYS questionnaire were revised in consultation with social science researchers, the Center RISE staff, LA-DCFS, and community collaborators from the child welfare and dependency court systems. In order to confirm that the questionnaire items and survey methodology were easy to understand and relevant to LA County youth in foster care, the study team conducted cognitive interviews with youth and caregivers and then used pilot testing the survey before a full launching.

Youth were eligible to participate in the LAFYS if they: 1) were at least 12 years old, 2) were in “out-of-home” care, 3) were not in juvenile detention, 4) had an address in the state of California, 5) were able to complete the survey in English, and 6) if the CWS/ CMS state child welfare database had both an address and phone number for them. In order to achieve a final sample of n=765 completed interviews, The Los Angeles Department of Child and Family Services (LA-DCFS) provided the contact information for a random sample of 2,967 foster youth ages 12-21 years in out-of-home care in Los Angeles County.

A stratified random sampling technique was used where the sample was split into two age groups: 12-16 years and 17 years and up. Interviews took approximately 20 minutes and were conducted over the phone using a Computer-Assisted Telephone Interview process by Westat Inc, which allowed for youth to respond to

questions using their telephone’s keypad. 786 interviews were completed, yielding a 41.8% response rate.

## ABOUT CONTRIBUTORS

### FUNDING

#### **The Federal Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII)**

is a 5-year, \$100 million, multi-site demonstration project designed to improve permanency outcomes among children in foster care who have the most serious barriers to permanency.

#### **The L.A. LGBT Center’s Children, Youth & Family Services**

**Department** operates R.I.S.E., an initiative designed to help LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system achieve permanency.

### AUTHORING

**The Williams Institute**, a national think tank at UCLA School of Law, is dedicated to conducting rigorous, independent research on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy.

**Holarchy Consulting** has worked in the area of LGBTQ system-involved youth for over 15 years, conducting several trainings and presentations on the multiple risks LGBTQ youth face.

### OTHER

**Westat** is an employee-owned research firm that provides

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1 (Gates & Newport, 2013; Kann et al., 2011; LAUSD, 2013; Russell, Seif and Truong, 2001)

2 (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Greytak, 2013; SFUSD, 2011)

3 (Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006)

research services to foundations and associations, agencies of the federal, state and local government, and businesses.

## NOTES

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