



# HOMELESS SHELTER ACCESS AMONG TRANSGENDER ADULTS

## Findings from the 2015 US Transgender Survey

**AUTHORS:**

Kathryn O'Neill  
Bianca D.M. Wilson  
Jody L. Herman

**BRIEF** / NOVEMBER 2020

---

Emergency shelters (aka, homeless shelters) are a key component to the homelessness crisis response system.<sup>1</sup> While research has found that transgender people are overrepresented among those who are unstably housed in the U.S.,<sup>2,3</sup> data are scarce regarding transgender people's experiences with the programs designed to reduce or alleviate the impact of homelessness. Further, the dominant policy discussion on LGBT homelessness has historically focused on youth, leaving less known about homelessness among transgender adults across the age spectrum.<sup>4</sup>

Results from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS) indicate that many transgender adults who experience homelessness face barriers when accessing shelters. Respondents were grouped by age: 18-25 years, 26-49 years, and ages 50+.

---

<sup>1</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. (n.d.). Crisis Response. <https://endhomelessness.org/ending-homelessness/solutions/crisis-response/>

<sup>2</sup> Vasquez, L. A., Romero, A. P. (September 2020). Comment Letter on making admission or placement determinations based on sex in facilities under community planning and development housing programs (FR-6152) (RIN 2506-AC53). Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/hud-gi-shelters-comment/>

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, B. D. M., Choi, S. K., Harper, G. W., Lightfoot, M., Russell, S., & Meyer, I.H. (2020). *Homelessness among LGBT adults in the U.S.* Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-homelessness-us/>

<sup>4</sup> Ecker, J., Aubry, T., & Sylvestre, J. (2019). Pathways into homelessness among LGBTQ2S adults. *Homosexuality*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/00918369.2019.1600902

---

- 30% of the study participants reported that they have experienced homelessness at some point in their lifetime.<sup>5</sup> Homelessness includes staying in a shelter, living on the street, living out of a car, or staying temporarily with family or friends because one cannot afford housing.
  - Adults aged 26-49 reported significantly higher rates of lifetime homelessness than either younger or older adults.
- 12.5% of the respondents in this study reported experiencing homelessness in the past year because they are transgender.<sup>6</sup>
  - Respondents over 50 were significantly less likely to have experienced recent homelessness than the two younger groups of adults in the study. Young adults aged 18-25 and adults aged 26-49 years did not report significantly different experiences of recent homelessness.
- 15.3% of those who experienced homelessness due to their transgender status in the past year sought shelter at a homeless shelter. Just under 85% did not seek shelter at a homeless shelter due to fear of mistreatment or other reasons.
  - 25.7% of those who experienced homelessness due to their transgender status in the past year did not seek shelter because they feared they would be mistreated as a transgender person.<sup>7</sup>
- Of those who sought shelter,
  - 41.4% were denied access to one or more shelters.
  - Almost 30% reported being denied shelter due to being transgender or due to their gender expression.
  - 44% experienced some form of mistreatment at a shelter, including harassment, assault, or requirements to dress or present as the wrong gender in the shelter.

Similar to a population-based study of LGBT adults, this study indicates that transgender adults experience recent and lifetime homelessness at high rates.<sup>8</sup> While transgender people over the age of 50 years were least likely to experience recent homelessness compared to younger adults, the percentage reported in this sample was still concerning; further it is notable that adults ages 26-49 years reported recent homelessness as often as the youngest adults, indicating a trajectory of persistent homelessness for transgender people.

The findings show that significant numbers of transgender adults do not have adequate access to emergency housing services. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development recently proposed an administrative rule that would roll back protections against gender identity discrimination in homeless shelters and other HUD-funded facilities. If finalized, this rule could make it more difficult for transgender people experiencing homelessness to access shelters, exacerbating existing reports of mistreatment and discrimination.

---

<sup>5</sup> James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality.

<sup>6</sup> James, et al., 2016.

<sup>7</sup> James, et al., 2016.

<sup>8</sup> James, et al., 2016.

Table 1. Homelessness among 2015 USTS respondents

		18-25	26-49	50+	ALL ADULTS
		N = 11,840	N = 12,151	N = 3,724	N = 27,715
		% (95% Confidence Interval)			
Ever homeless		23.3 (22.2, 24.4)	39.0 (37.8, 40.2)	27.3 (25.6, 29.1)	30.3 (29.5, 31.0)
Past year homelessness because of being transgender		13.9 (12.9, 15.0)	12.2 (11.2, 13.2)	7.8 (6.5, 9.4)	12.5 (11.8, 13.1)
Experienced past year homelessness because of being transgender		18-25	26-49	50+	ALL ADULTS
		N = 1,163	N = 925	N = 166	N = 2,254
When you experienced homelessness <b>this past year</b> , did you seek shelter in a homeless shelter? <b>Mark all that apply.</b>	Yes, and I stayed at one or more shelters.	9.4 (6.9, 12.8)	9.3 (7.0, 12.3)	18.1 (11.9, 26.6)	10.0 (8.2, 12.1)
	Yes, but I was denied access to one or more shelters.	4.2 (3.0, 5.9)	8.2 (5.9, 11.3)	9.8 (4.9, 18.5)	6.3 (5.0, 8.0)
	No, because I feared I would be mistreated as a trans person	23.5 (20.4, 27.0)	28.0 (24.3, 32.1)	26.4 (18.1, 36.9)	25.7 (23.3, 28.3)
	No, for other reasons.	64.0 (60.0, 67.9)	55.2 (50.8, 59.5)	46.6 (36.8, 56.6)	59.0 (56.2, 61.8)
	Sought shelter (either of the Yes options)	12.4 (9.7, 15.8)	16.7 (13.5, 20.5)	27.0 (19.1, 36.7)	15.3 (13.2, 17.7)
Sought Shelter		18-25	26-49	50+	ALL ADULTS
		N = 126	N = 136	N = 47	N = 309
Of those that sought shelter, how many were denied.		34.1 (23.8, 46.2)	48.9 (37.4, 60.4)	36.3 (19.8, 56.8)	41.4 (33.8, 49.4)
Denied shelter due to being transgender or due to their gender expression among those that sought shelter.		23.7 (15.5, 34.4)	34.7 (24.5, 46.4)	31.0 (15.3, 52.7)	29.8 (23.2, 37.3)
Reported mistreatment at a shelter among those that sought shelter in past year.		54.1 (40.9, 66.7)	37.1 (26.8, 48.7)	37.6 (22.3, 55.9)	44.0 (36.1, 52.2)

## METHODS NOTE

This report is based on analyses of data generated from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS), which was conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality. To find out more about the U.S. Transgender Survey, visit <http://www.ustranssurvey.org/reports>. Analyses for this report were conducted with the standard survey weight applied. Confidence Intervals were used to conservatively estimate significant differences. If the 95% confidence intervals of two estimates do not overlap, they are considered significantly different.

## AUTHORS

**Kathryn O'Neill, M.P.P.**, is a Policy Analyst at the Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law.

**Bianca D.M. Wilson, Ph.D.**, is a Senior Scholar of Public Policy at the Williams Institute. She is also the Principal Investigator of the Pathways to Justice Project.

**Jody L. Herman, Ph.D.**, is a Scholar of Public Policy at the Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law.

## ABOUT THE WILLIAMS INSTITUTE

The Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law and Public Policy at UCLA School of Law advances law and public policy through rigorous, independent research and scholarship, and disseminates its work through a variety of education programs and media to judges, legislators, lawyers, other policymakers and the public. These studies can be accessed at the Williams Institute website.

### For more information

The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law

Box 951476

Los Angeles, CA 90095-1476

Phone: (310) 267-4382

Email: [williamsinstitute@law.ucla.edu](mailto:williamsinstitute@law.ucla.edu)

Website: <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu>

