



pathfinders
Empowering Youth. Changing Lives.

2023 Issue Brief

LGBTQ+ Young Adult Homelessness



Overview

In Milwaukee and across the nation, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) young people experience homelessness at alarming numbers.

National Network for Youth's Spring 2023 Policy Briefⁱ estimates that, of the 3.5 million young adults aged 18 to 25 who experience homelessness in the U.S. annually,ⁱⁱ 40% identify as LGBTQ+.ⁱⁱⁱ

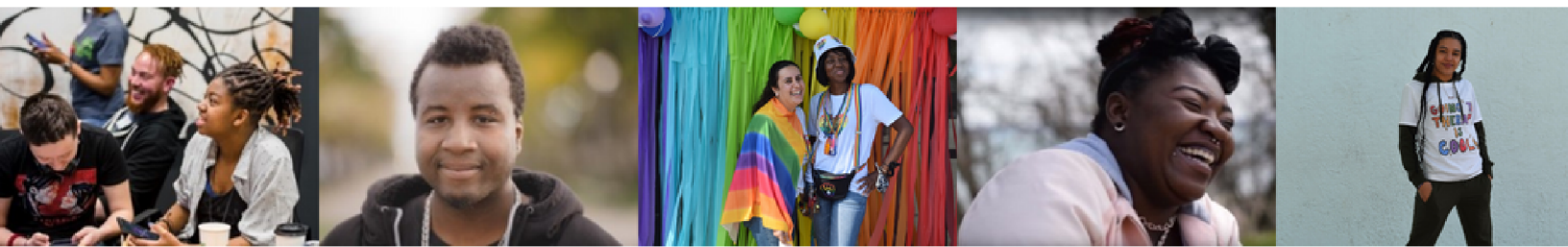
At Pathfinders, a Milwaukee nonprofit providing housing, basic needs, safety and mental health support to unhoused youth and young adults, that number is even higher:

Since 2018, LGBTQ+ young adults have made up 51% of those served in Pathfinders housing programs.

Experiencing homelessness as a young person is highly correlated with lifelong housing instability,^{iv,v} impacting every aspect of life: school, jobs, relationships, mental health and hope for the future. And homelessness disproportionately impacts youth and young adults with marginalized identities:^{vi} LGBTQ+; Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC); those living in poverty and those with disabilities.

At 18, young people are ready to take the next steps to independent adulthood yet still in need of resources and support. LGBTQ+ youth who have been rejected by their families, who don't have someone they can trust and who do not have a safe place to stay are highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, violence and mental health crises. The rise in LGBTQ+ hate crimes, homelessness criminalization and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation add additional layers of trauma for Queer and Trans young people without the most basic of needs: a place to call home.

LGBTQ+ competent, welcoming and affirming homelessness services must be available to young people in Milwaukee and around the country. Pathfinders is proud to prioritize the unique needs of LGBTQ+ youth as we engage thousands of young adults experiencing homelessness each year.



About LGBTQ+ Young Adult Homelessness

“For all the progress we’ve achieved, we still see LGBTQ+ young people who are kicked out of their homes, who are on the margins and exploited, who can’t receive quality care. Our young people deserve better.”

– Tim Baack, Pathfinders President & CEO

Unhoused LGBTQ+ young people who come to Pathfinders report family rejection, damaged familial relationships, violence and family housing instability as reasons for their homelessness. Experiences with the foster care and youth justice systems, both of which see an over-representation of LGBTQ+ youth, also increase their likelihood of homelessness.^{vii}

LGBTQ+ youth report discrimination, harassment and violence when trying to access other homeless services. Trans and non-binary young people face an additional challenge: most shelters are gender-segregated and do not provide an alternative sleeping option such as a private room. LGBTQ+ young adults at Pathfinders report feeling unsafe in shelter settings where most residents are older than them.

“When I first experienced homelessness...I went to a homeless shelter and I felt like fresh meat. People thought I was 35, but I had just turned 18.”

- A Pathfinders Young Person

**Though all types of homelessness are traumatic,
there is no agreement at the federal level on the definition of “homeless.”**

The U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development’s definition – and, therefore, funding – prioritizes those experiencing street homelessness or staying in a shelter. This excludes the many unhoused young people who are living doubled or tripled up or trading sex for a place to stay. Young people experiencing these types of homelessness face the same or greater risks to their health, safety and stability, and the federal definition of homelessness must be expanded to support all young people in need of a home.

Without shelter services they feel safe accessing, LGBTQ+ homeless youth report to Pathfinders that they are more likely to sleep outside, trade sex for a place to stay, sleep in a car or sleep somewhere unsafe such as an abandoned building.

Sexual Exploitation & LGBTQ+ Homelessness

LGBTQ+ identity and vulnerability to sexual exploitation and trafficking are strongly linked.

In Pathfinders programs supporting sexually exploited young people, about one-third of participants identify as LGBTQ+ and nearly all are homeless or experiencing housing instability.

Trans youth also represent a disproportionate number of participants in Pathfinders anti-sexual violence programs.

Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation

Anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and community sentiment add additional layers of harm for youth experiencing homelessness. In recent years, a deeply divided Wisconsin legislature has introduced bills targeting LGBTQ+ youth and, in 2023, the Wisconsin GOP again blocked a ban on conversion therapy.^{viii}

This political rhetoric – and action – has exacerbated the threats to the safety and mental wellness of LGBTQ+ youth. Recent national data indicate that the odds of being a victim of a violent crime are nine times greater for LGBTQ+ people than their straight, White peers.^{ix} And 75% of LGBTQ+ youth say that hate crimes and threats of violence against LGBTQ people and spaces often give them stress or anxiety.^x

But what is the solution?

Effectively addressing LGBTQ+ young adult homelessness means adapting existing services, advocating for legislative change and crafting innovative new strategies in partnership with unhoused LGBTQ+ young people.

How Pathfinders Supports Unhoused LGBTQ+ Young People

For more than 50 years, Pathfinders' shelter has supported the needs of runaway and homeless youth ages 11 to 17, many of whom identify as LGBTQ+. In response to the needs of Trans youth, our shelter offers a private room for those who feel unsafe in gender-segregated sleeping arrangements.

*"At Pathfinders, you're surrounded
by people who love and
appreciate you..."*
-- A Pathfinders Youth

In 2009, Pathfinders began providing supported housing for young adults ages 18-25 in response to LGBTQ+ young people aging out of our shelter program. Our youth anti-sexual violence programs were established in 2018 to address the overwhelming number of unhoused young people facing sexual trafficking, exploitation and violence. Pathfinders' mental health services continue to expand to meet the complex needs of Pathfinders unhoused youth and young adults with a focus on hiring LGBTQ+ and Black and Brown staff.

Uplifting Youth Voice

By intentionally seeking young people's input, Pathfinders' services change as young people's needs evolve. We include youth in the hiring process for direct service staff and provide ongoing training to ensure staff demonstrate cultural competence when working with LGBTQ+ young people. Youth advisory boards guide program design and advocacy efforts.

Impact in Action: Q-BLOK

Q-BLOK is a Pathfinders housing program designed with and for LGBTQ+ and allied young adults. As Queer youth were aging out of Pathfinders' youth shelter, they expressed a need for ongoing housing support. Those young people were invited to the planning table for Q-BLOK. Utilizing the Housing First approach, Q-BLOK participants are supported in choosing a safe place to live then offered support for their mental wellness, education, employment and other goals.

Pathfinders Q-BLOK program has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as a role model approach for working with LGBTQ+ homeless youth.



LGBTQ+ Inclusivity vs. Exclusivity

Pathfinders is an LGBTQ+ inclusive organization, serving young people who identify on every point of the sexual orientation and gender identity spectrums. Some youth we serve do not identify as queer, but exchange sex with same-gender partners. Others may present as typically male or female and utilize pronouns that are reflective of a different gender. Young people who identify as straight and/or cisgender are also part of the Pathfinders community. Creating a space that is welcoming and affirming of all is key to ensuring Pathfinders' youth feel safe, seen, respected and valued.

Advocacy, Collaboration & Knowledge-Sharing

Pathfinders has a long history of advocating for issues impacting unhoused LGBTQ+ young people. We support the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act (Pathfinders is a funding recipient), the Homeless Children and Youth Act that maintains consistent definitions of homelessness and eligibility standards for receiving support across federal departments and the Equality Act to ensure unhoused LGBTQ+ young people are protected from discrimination in federally funded programs.

Youth leaders engage in advocacy and participate in initiatives to influence how homelessness service providers can better serve LGBTQ+ young people.

Pathfinders' President & CEO, Tim Baack, helped craft the federal Equal Access Rule, developing and implementing training to build the LGBTQ+ competency of youth-serving agencies across Wisconsin and the U.S.



Impact in Action: Power of Paths Youth Action Board

In 2022, Pathfinders young people came together to voice their experiences with homeless services in Milwaukee, share ideas on how to end youth homelessness and work together to take action. The “Power of Paths” Youth Action Board has advocated in Madison, advised the Milwaukee Continuum of Care and spearheaded the application for Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) funding through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. In 2023, the city of Milwaukee was awarded more than \$3 million in YHDP funding. Pathfinders' Youth Action Board are now meeting with government and nonprofit partners to conduct strategic planning for how to use these funds to address youth homelessness.

Outcomes

All of Pathfinders' approaches have resulted in tremendous outcomes for young people. In 2022, 90% of young adults in Pathfinders' housing programs were safely housed, 100% of young people accessing basic needs services had those needs met, and 99% of participants in our anti-sexual violence programs received support in developing a safety plan.

Two-thirds of Pathfinders housing program participants graduate without the need for lifelong housing support.

Recommendations

LGBTQ+ youth and young adult homelessness is at a crisis point, both in Milwaukee and across the country. More needs to be done: culturally, legislatively and in services available to support LGBTQ+ young people.

In their 2023 LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness Policy Brief, National Network for Youth provides the following recommendations for addressing this issue:

- Ensure all homeless shelter and housing program staff receive training and support to create spaces that are competent, welcoming, affirming and equitable for LGBTQ+ young people.
- Expand access to and funding for youth-centric Rapid Rehousing programs.
- Advocate for federal legislation that extends services and protections for unhoused LGBTQ+ youth, including:
 - The Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act -- nn4youth.org/policy/federal-policy-on-youth-homelessness/rhya/
 - The Homeless Children and Youth Act -- nn4youth.org/policy/federal-policy-on-youth-homelessness/hcya/ and
 - The Equality Act -- hrc.org/press-releases/human-rights-campaign-calls-on-house-leadership-in-118th-congress-to-uphold-lgbtq-equality.

Housing is essential to young people's safety and stability. So, too, is access to support that welcomes and affirms young people's identities. Pathfinders is deeply committed to being a safe resource for LGBTQ+ youth in crisis and we are proud to uplift the voices of the youth we serve to inform our shared way forward.

Pathfinders' Power of Paths Youth Action Board shared recommendations for how homeless service providers can be more welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ+ young people. These included:

- Hiring LGBTQ+ staff with lived homelessness experience.
- Asking and sharing pronouns.
- Training staff on mental health crises and trauma.
- Creating more shelters for LGBTQ+ young people specifically.

When asked why Pathfinders feels like a safe and affirming space for them, they said staff help them feel accepted. They appreciate the many LGBTQ+ flags, the diversity of staff and the family-like atmosphere.

"Pathfinders accepts you for who you are." - A Pathfinders Young Person

Ready to take action on LGBTQ+ Young Adult Homelessness? Contact your legislators to ask for more funding for Runaway and Homeless Youth issues and for a broader, single definition of homelessness. Look up your legislators here:



Thank you to the National Network for Youth for their research, partnership and insight. Learn more about LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness by reading their recent Policy Brief:



Sources

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