

# L.A. study finds 19 percent of foster youth identify as 'LGBTQ'



*The study report, Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Foster Care: Assessing Disproportionality and Disparities in Los Angeles, was funded as part of a federal grant awarded to the Los Angeles LGBT Center.*

A joint study conducted by the Los Angeles LGBT Center and the Williams Institute found that 19 percent of the young people placed in foster care programs in Los Angeles County identify as “LGBTQ youth.”

The authors of [the study, which was released on Wednesday](#), say the 19 percent figure is about twice the percentage of all LGBT youth believed to reside in the sprawling county.

The study also found that LGBT youth are twice as likely to report being treated poorly in the foster care system than non-LGBT youth and they are twice as likely to be living in a group home rather than the preferred living arrangement with a family.

In what the authors called especially troubling, the study found that three times as many LGBT foster youth reported being hospitalized for emotional distress than heterosexual foster youth.

“Historically, many of the LGBTQ youth who turn to us for a safe place to live have aged out of the foster system, don’t have the skills or resources to make it out on their own, and would otherwise be homeless,” said Los Angeles LGBT Center CEO Lorri L. Jean.

“So this study supports our long-held belief that LGBTQ youth are not only overrepresented in the foster care system but extremely disadvantaged within that system,” Jean said.

The study report, Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Foster Care: Assessing Disproportionality and Disparities in Los Angeles, was funded as part of a federal grant awarded to the Los Angeles LGBT Center, according to a statement released by the Center.

The statement says the report was co-authored by scholars at the Williams Institute, an LGBT think tank that’s part of the University of California at Los Angeles, and Holarchy Consulting, a consulting firm with experience in LGBT youth related issues.

The study report says the study consisted of telephone interviews with 786 randomly sampled youth between the ages of 12 and 21 who were living in foster care arrangements in L.A. County.

It says that generally LGBT foster youth in Los Angeles County have 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,” the report says. “Further, about 10 percent of LGBTQ youth reported being born outside the U.S. and nearly one-third had a biological mother or father that had been born outside of the U.S.”

The report presented these additional findings:

- 13.6 percent of foster youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning.
- 13.2 percent reported some level of same-sex attraction
- 5.6 percent identify as transgender
- The findings show that there are between 1.5 to 2 times as many LGBTRQ youth living in foster care as LGBTQ youth estimated to be living outside of foster

care.

- More than 18 percent of all respondents in the survey reported experiencing discrimination related to their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, including some who don't identify as LGBTQ.
- LGBT youth have a higher average number of foster care placements and are more likely to be living in a group home than non-LGBT foster youth.

In a section called "Implications for Policy Makers and Caregivers," the report calls on those in charge of foster care programs to take steps to "better understand the lives and unique challenges of the LGBTQ youth they serve."

In noting that the demographic characteristics of the LGBTQ youth in foster care were similar to non-LGBT foster youth, the report says the study found the LGBTQ respondents to have these demographics: Latino — 54.6 percent; black — 28.5 percent; white — 6.4 percent; American Indian — 3.0 percent; Asian/Pacific Islander — 2.9 percent; bi/multi-racial or ethnic—4.7 percent.

"The study validates the importance of our ongoing work to develop a new model of care for LGBTQ foster youth," Jean said in a statement. "They remain some of the most vulnerable, and forgotten, in our community," she said.

"When finished, we hope this model will be replicated in cities around the country because there's no reason to believe the problems for LGBTQ foster youth are unique to Los Angeles," Jean said.

As an example of some of the problems faced by LGBT youth in foster care, the Los Angeles LGBT Center's statement includes comments by Geovanni Fernandez, now 38, who told of his own experience as a foster youth since he was 3.

"The family I had when I came out, at the age of 17, was very religious and said gay people burn in hell," Fernandez said. "On Thanksgiving Day

they made me stay in my room until all the guests left so I wouldn't infect them with the 'gay germs,'" he said.

"I was scared and the social worker assigned to me wasn't any help. After I came out to her she changed the subject," he recounted. "I really thought there was something wrong with me."

Sultan Shakir, executive director of the D.C.-based LGBT youth advocacy group SMYAL, said SMYAL has learned of problems in the foster care system in Washington and surrounding suburbs similar to those discussed in the Los Angeles study, including instances of LGBT youth being victimized by other youth in foster care.

"This study is important because it provides empirical evidence of these issues, and it's likely that the issues it highlights in L.A. are also issues LGBTQ youth in foster care experience across the country, including here in the D.C. metro area," he said.

"We need data like this for D.C., as well as surrounding jurisdictions," said Shakir.