



Sexual and gender minority disproportionality and disparities in child welfare: A population-based study



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ABSTRACT

Empirical research is needed to support ongoing efforts to improve services for sexual and gender minority youth in foster care. Further, data on the presence of sexual and gender minority youth within the child welfare system are needed to encourage counties that have not yet begun to engage in any efforts to address the unique needs and barriers to permanency for these youth. The current study reports on the findings of the Los Angeles Foster Youth Survey (LAFYS) which was designed to assess the proportion of youth placed in the Los Angeles County public child welfare system who are LGBTQ and to examine their experiences in communities, schools, and foster care. Findings indicate that approximately 19% of Los Angeles foster youth are LGBTQ. This proportion of youth is significantly higher than estimates of adolescent and young adult sexual and gender minority identification rates in the general population. Further, analyses also indicate that sexual and gender minority youth in this study are less satisfied with their child welfare system experience, are more likely to experience homelessness, are moved around to more placements, and are experiencing higher levels of emotional distress compared to their non-LGBTQ counterparts.

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1. Introduction

There are over 400,000 children in foster care and without permanent homes in the U.S. (Children's Bureau, 2015). Many child welfare advocates have noted that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are a significant subgroup of this population (Wilber, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006). However, LGBTQ youth represent an unknown proportion of the total foster youth population, and it remains unclear whether there is evidence of disproportionality. Further, research on the experiences of LGBTQ youth in foster care indicate that they are exposed to unique risks associated with people's responses to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Mallon, 1998). Yet, we do not have population-based data on whether LGBTQ youth in foster care experience disparities. The need for more population-based data on LGBTQ youth in foster care was one of the primary conclusions of the recent Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) report on the human services needs among LGBT people (Burwick, Gates, Baumgartner, & Friend, 2014). In order for the child welfare system to fulfill its duty, it is critical that policymakers and caregivers have an understanding of the lives and unique challenges of the LGBTQ youth they serve.

Family rejection and violence are often cited as reasons for LGBTQ youth entering out-of-home care. Though no research study with foster youth has directly made this connection, research with youth experiencing homelessness indicates there may be some evidence for this theory. One study of homeless youth found that while both sexual minority and majority youth left their homes for similar reasons (family conflict, problems with family members, and desire for freedom), LGBTQ youth left at nearly double the rate (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002). Related studies have documented significant proportions of LGBTQ youth reporting verbal and physical violence within their families in response to their sexual and/or gender minority statuses (Hunter, 1990; Savin-Williams, 1994).

Rejection, abuse, and discrimination continue to affect LGBTQ youth while they are in out-of-home care. At various points in time while in the child welfare system these youth interact with case workers, foster parents, congregate care facility employees, and other foster youth. These encounters often include elements of anti-LGBT bias that can manifest as harassment and violence at the hands of other foster youth and caretakers, misconceptions of LGBTQ youth as sexual predators, attempts by foster parents to "cure" youth of their sexual or gender minority identity, and unfair isolation or discipline for otherwise age-appropriate conduct in group homes (Clements & Rosenwald, 2008; Mallon, 1998; Wilber et al., 2006). One study revealed that 56% of LGBT foster youth surveyed spent time on the streets because they felt safer there than in their group or foster home (Feinstein, Greenblatt, Hass, Kohn, & Rana, 2001). In addition to discrimination and safety concerns, practitioner accounts indicate that LGBTQ youth in foster care are

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less likely to find a permanent home (by reunification or adoption) than other youth, with transgender youth having the most difficult time achieving permanency (CASA, 2009; Mallon, 2009). These studies and advocate accounts are important perspectives for informing policies and practices; yet, a lack of population-level data on disparities limits the field's understanding of how pronounced these differences are within the child welfare system.

1.1. Claims of LGBTQ disproportionality in foster care

Across many practitioner accounts of the experiences of LGBTQ youth in foster care, there have been claims that this group is overrepresented in the child welfare system. Yet, no empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals have been undertaken to directly assess evidence of LGBTQ disproportionality in foster care. Sexual orientation and gender identity are not standard parts of child welfare administrative data collection in the U.S. As such, non-administrative sources of data must be considered to answer questions about LGBTQ youth in foster care. There has been one self-published report ("The Midwest Study") on the economic, health and demographic characteristics (including sexual orientation) of young adults who were previously in foster care (Dworsky & Hall, 2013). The Midwest Study found that 11–15% of respondents identified as LGB, however the sampling methods do not allow for estimates of the population proportion. Another self-published report conducted by Tarnai and Krebill-Prather (2008) was particularly notable due to its larger sample size and aim to survey the entire population of a state child welfare agency. The study attempted to survey all of Washington State's foster care population to assess basic demographics (including both sexual orientation and gender identity) and experiences in foster care (Tarnai & Krebill-Prather, 2008). They found that 91% of their sample identified as heterosexual, 2% identified as gay or lesbian, 6% identified as bisexual, and 0.1% identified as transgender. Despite the strengths of this study, the items used to measure sexual orientation and gender identity are not those recommended by current scholars on the topic (The GenIUSS Group, 2014; Sexual Minority Assessment Research Team, 2009). Thus, there remains a need for population-based research that appropriately measures the proportion of foster youth who are LGBTQ and examines their unique experiences in order to inform allocation of child welfare resources and service provision.

1.2. Identifying the correct general youth LGBT population estimate

Assessing whether LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system requires a comparison between the proportion of LGBTQ youth in foster care and those in the general population. For over three decades, extensive research on adolescent demographic characteristics and behavior has been conducted via school-wide, state, or national surveys. Starting in the mid-1980's, many of these studies included questions about sexual orientation (Reis & Saewyc, 1999; Remafedi, Resnick, Blum, & Harris, 1992; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). These studies likely included youth in foster care, but did not specifically focus on that population, nor did they report participants' dependency status. Literature published in the U.S. report a range of estimates of the percentage of the total youth population who are LGBTQ. In an analysis of the largest sample of people asked directly about their sexual and gender minority status, Gates and Newport (2012) reported that 6.4% of the U.S. adult population 18–29 years old identified as LGBT. The data used for these estimates were responses to the Gallup Daily tracking survey, which includes one item that asks whether the respondents identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender – combining an assessment of sexual and gender minority status. Specific to youth, both the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health Study) have provided estimates of sexual minority status among

adolescents. Using YRBS data, Kann et al. (2011) assessed sexual orientation through both self-identification with a sexual minority label and sex of sexual partners across multiple states and districts that opted-in to include sexual orientation questions on their YRBS surveys. Though the exact wording of the sexual identity question varied among municipalities, they all used one question about which sexual identity label the respondents would choose for themselves, similar to the item used in this study. They estimated that, across the locations using a sexual orientation survey item, a median of 93% identified as heterosexual, 3.7% identified as bisexual, and 2.5% were unsure about their sexual identity, and 1.3% identified as gay or lesbian. Using Wave 1 of the Add Health data from 1995, Russell et al. (2001) found similar rates of sexual minority status through an assessment of responses to items about romantic attraction, similar to those used in the current study. Among adolescents who were 12–19 years old in 1995, they estimated that 7.4% of boys and 5.3% of girls reported some level of same-sex attraction. Taken together, these studies of sexual orientation using identity and attraction measures would suggest that sexual minority youth and young adults comprise between 6 and 8% of the U.S. youth population.

With regard to transgender status, population estimates are more challenging to identify because transgender status alone is not yet uniformly included on any national or statewide probability sample surveys of youth. However, some studies do provide estimates to consider in relation to the current study. For example, the Boston Youth Survey (BYS) conducted a probability survey of the city school district and used a single item approach to assess transgender status. Analyses of BYS reported in a peer-reviewed publication indicated that 17 out of 908 (1.7%) youth 13–19 years old identified as transgender (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009). In a recent unpublished pilot using a nationally representative online survey, findings showed that 1.4% of the year 1 and 3.2% of the year 2 samples identified as transgender (Greytak, 2013). Taken together, these studies of transgender status within local probability surveys or national representative non-probability sample surveys would suggest that transgender youth make up somewhere between 1.3–3.2% of the U.S. youth population, but clearly more research is needed in this area.

1.3. Current study

The Los Angeles Foster Youth Study (LAFYS) was a one-time study conducted by the authors and their research team as part of their collaboration with the Recognize Intervene Support Empower (RISE) initiative, a five-year cooperative agreement awarded to the Los Angeles LGBT Center. This was one of six sites funded through the Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII; see, e.g., Permanency Innovations Initiative Training and Technical Assistance Project & Permanency Innovations Initiative Evaluation Team, 2013). RISE aimed to address barriers to permanency and wellbeing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in the child welfare system in Los Angeles County by decreasing anti-gay and anti-transgender bias in families and care-giving settings through the design of interventions. We designed the LAFYS to provide data that may inform the process of implementing and evaluating the interventions that RISE developed, and to answer core empirical questions about LGBTQ youth disproportionality and disparities. The current study presents findings for the primary empirical questions that guided the design of the study:

- 1) What percent of foster youth are LGBTQ and does this value indicate disproportionality?
- 2) Are LGBTQ youth experiencing disparities in risks to permanency and wellbeing?

In order to answer the first question on disproportionality, we also sought to use available population data to create a more precise estimate of LGBTQ youth in the general population.

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