

Human Services for Low-Income and At-Risk LGBT Populations:

Research Recommendations on Child Welfare Programs

This brief presents recommendations created as part of the Research Development Project on the Human Service Needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Populations. The project identified the knowledge base and research needs related to LGBT people's socioeconomic circumstances and risk factors, their current participation in human services funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and strategies for serving these populations effectively. Its methods included a literature review, analyses of secondary data sources, and consultations with experts and service providers.

In the area of child welfare programs, the project addressed four topics relevant to LGBT people:

1. The risk of experiencing child maltreatment (neglect and physical, sexual, or emotional abuse) among LGBT people, including people who are questioning or unsure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity
2. Experiences of LGBT youth in child welfare programs
3. The effectiveness of child welfare services for LGBT youth in foster care
4. The participation of LGBT adults in child welfare programs as foster or adoptive parents

For each topic, the project team identified research needs and recommended key questions and possible approaches for future research. Table 1 summarizes these recommendations.

A companion report to this brief, *Human Services for Low-Income and At-Risk LGBT Populations: An Assessment of the Knowledge Base and Research Needs* (Burwick et al. 2014), available at www.acf.hhs.gov/opre, provides details on existing research related to these topics.

A Note on Data Sources for Studying LGBT Populations and Human Services

The Research Development Project identified a general need to increase the number of population-based surveys and administrative data sources on human services that include measures of sexual orientation and gender identity. Implementing many of the research recommendations presented in this brief would require new data collection or the addition of items on sexual orientation and gender identity to existing federal and state surveys and administrative systems.

The collection and analysis of data on sexual orientation and gender identity pose a range of challenges. These challenges include the willingness of respondents to accurately report their sexual orientation or gender identity, differences in conceptualization of sexual orientation and gender identity across racial and ethnic groups and age cohorts, and small sample sizes when such data are available. Nevertheless, researchers in a range of disciplines have successfully implemented sexual orientation and gender identity measures in surveys and other data collection efforts.

Table 1. Child Welfare Programs: Recommended Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

Research question	Possible approaches
Topic 1: Risk of experiencing child maltreatment among LGBT people	
Does the prevalence or type of child maltreatment experienced by sexual and gender minorities differ by individual characteristics?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Analysis of national or state population-based surveys^a
What family or community characteristics are associated with risk of experiencing child maltreatment among LGBT people?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Longitudinal study including LGBT people ▪ One-time survey of LGBT people
Topic 2: Experiences of LGBT youth in child welfare settings	
What proportion of youth in foster care do LGBT youth comprise? What are the characteristics of LGBT youth in foster care?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Surveys of youth in foster care
What are perceptions among LGBT youth in foster care of the safety, supportiveness, and appropriateness of placements and other services they receive?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Surveys of youth in foster care ▪ Focus groups/interviews with youth in foster care
How do placement histories and permanency outcomes of LGBT and non-LGBT youth in foster care compare?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Longitudinal study of youth in foster care ▪ One-time survey of youth currently or formerly in foster care
Topic 3: Effectiveness of child welfare services for LGBT youth	
To what extent are public child welfare agencies taking steps to improve services for young LGBT people? What successes and challenges have agencies experienced?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Survey of child welfare agencies ▪ Focus groups/interviews with child welfare agency staff
What models are available to enhance permanency outcomes for LGBT youth in care or young people at risk of child welfare involvement and how effective are they?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demonstration evaluation^b
Topic 4: Participation of LGBT adults in child welfare services	
What are the experiences of prospective LGBT foster and adoptive parents with public child welfare agencies?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Survey of LGBT foster and adoptive parents or prospective parents ▪ Focus groups/interviews with LGBT foster and adoptive parents
To what extent and how effectively are public child welfare agencies engaging LGBT adults as foster and adoptive parents?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Survey of child welfare agencies ▪ Focus groups/interviews with child welfare agency staff ▪ Focus groups/interviews with LGBT foster and adoptive parents

^a Assumes surveys or administrative data systems include or add items to identify the sexual orientation and/or gender identity of respondents.

^b Including implementation and impact studies.

TOPIC 1: RISK OF EXPERIENCING CHILD MALTREATMENT AMONG LGBT PEOPLE

Research Need:

Child maltreatment risk among LGBT subpopulations and factors affecting maltreatment risk

Existing research has found that young people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) or whose behavior does not conform to societal gender norms are more likely to experience maltreatment by parents, guardians, or other adults compared to non-LGB and gender-conforming children and adolescents. Further study is needed to understand the prevalence of maltreatment experiences among youth who identify as transgender; how risks may differ based on individual, family, and community characteristics; and why LGBT youth may be at higher risk.

Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

- ***Does the prevalence or type of child maltreatment experienced by sexual and gender minorities differ by age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, or other individual characteristics?***

Researchers have compared the prevalence of child maltreatment experience among lesbians, gay males, bisexual males and females, and heterosexuals by analyzing data from representative school-based surveys and longitudinal and retrospective studies with purposive samples. To provide sample sizes needed to examine patterns of child maltreatment among additional subgroups of LGBT youth, standardized measures of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression could be added to large-scale surveys and longitudinal studies addressing child maltreatment. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a periodic population-based survey of students administered by states and local jurisdictions, has been used to examine the prevalence of some types of maltreatment among adolescents identifying as LGB or unsure of their sexual orientation. (In the past, not all states and localities have included questions on sexual orientation in the YRBS, but future versions of the standard YRBS questionnaire are expected to include items on these topics.) Other potential data sources include the Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect, which have been funded by ACF.

- ***What family and community characteristics are associated with risk of experiencing child maltreatment among LGBT people? What factors protect against child maltreatment?***

A longitudinal study, or a one-time survey including retrospective reports of child maltreatment, could compare child maltreatment risk for young people who are sexual minorities in families with various structures and backgrounds and in varied communities. This research could be conducted as part of a broader study to explore how family and community risk and protective factors are similar or different for LGBT and non-LGBT people.



TOPIC 2: EXPERIENCES OF LGBT YOUTH IN CHILD WELFARE SETTINGS

Research Need:

Characteristics of LGBT youth in foster care

Surveys of youth in foster care in a few jurisdictions and anecdotal evidence from child welfare service providers suggest that a disproportionate number of youth in foster care are LGBT. However, the number and proportion of LGBT youth in foster care and their characteristics remain unknown in nearly all states and localities. Additional data on the demographics and well-being of LGBTQ youth in care would help child welfare agencies better understand the population they serve.

Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

- ***What proportion of youth in foster care do LGBT youth comprise? What are the characteristics of LGBT youth in foster care—including demographics and mental and physical health—and how do they compare with those of non-LGBT youth in care?***

These topics could be addressed through surveys in multiple jurisdictions of youth in foster care. The surveys would include questions to identify sexual and gender minorities. Researchers could develop a model survey instrument and provide guidance to researchers and child welfare agencies on key aspects of its administration among youth in foster care, such as protection of respondent confidentiality, methods for asking questions about sexual orientation and gender identity, and securing informed consent from minors in care. Qualitative research with LGBT youth in foster care could support refinement of survey instruments. If child welfare agencies use standardized data collection instruments, analyses of survey data could compare proportions and characteristics of LGBT youth across jurisdictions. The Los Angeles Foster Youth Survey, which was conducted as part of the Administration for Children and Families Permanency Innovations Initiative, offers one potential model for surveys of these populations (Wilson et al 2014).



Research Need:

The supportiveness of child welfare services for LGBT youth in foster care

In qualitative studies, LGBT youth in foster care have reported harassment and other negative experiences related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Existing research also suggests that LGBT youth may experience a higher number of foster care placements, on average, than heterosexual youth. Additional study is needed to understand the service experiences and outcomes of LGBT youth in child welfare systems, including possible differences between LGBT and non-LGBT youth across jurisdictions.

Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

- ***What are perceptions among LGBT youth in foster care of the safety, supportiveness, and appropriateness of placements and other services they receive? Do perceptions differ among LGBT youth served by different agencies?***

This research could build on previous studies by gathering information from LGBT youth in foster care in a sample of jurisdictions that vary along key dimensions, such as region, urbanicity, and presence of policies or initiatives supportive of LGBT youth. Surveys using purposive or population-based samples may permit quantitative comparisons of perceptions among LGBT and non-LGBT youth in foster care. In-depth interviews or focus groups could qualitatively explore youths' experiences with child welfare agency staff or peers in foster care and their satisfaction with services or referrals they have received. Qualitative studies could also help identify agency policies or approaches that appear to positively or negatively influence perceptions of services. In addition, surveys and qualitative studies including child welfare administrators, direct service staff, and foster parents could explore perceptions among these groups of the supportiveness of services for LGBT youth.

- ***How do placement histories of LGBT and non-LGBT youth in foster care compare? Are LGBT youth in foster care as likely to achieve permanency through family reunification, adoption, permanent relative care, or other arrangements as similar non-LGBT youth?***

A longitudinal study of youth in foster care or a retrospective survey of youth who have exited foster care could document the placement histories and permanency outcomes of participants. This research might also examine nonplacement or post-placement events, such as running away from home. Data collection instruments would need to include measures of sexual orientation and gender identity and may need to oversample youth in the older age ranges to achieve sufficient sample sizes of LGBT youth.



TOPIC 3: STRATEGIES FOR PROVIDING EFFECTIVE CHILD WELFARE SERVICES TO LGBTQ CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Research Need:

Implementation and effectiveness of child welfare interventions for young LGBT people

Child welfare experts and practitioners have recommended a range of practices to improve services for young LGBT people, including adopting nondiscrimination policies, training agency staff regarding LGBT issues, ensuring that youth receive appropriate services and placements, and collecting and managing data regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. However, little is known about how widely child welfare agencies have adopted these recommendations or the effects of efforts to change systems and implement interventions focused on LGBT clients.

Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

- ***To what extent are public child welfare agencies taking steps to improve services for young LGBT people? What successes and challenges have agencies experienced in making changes to better serve these populations?***

A survey of public child welfare agencies nationwide could explore whether the agencies have adopted recommended practices, the types of practices adopted, and factors that facilitate or impede such efforts. An in-depth qualitative study of agency practices could focus on facilitators and barriers to system-wide changes, shifts in agency cultures, or implementation of discrete practices designed to improve services for LGBT youth. Such efforts may include training to enhance the cultural competency of child welfare agency staff or the designation of staff members as LGBT liaisons or specialists. This research might also focus on approaches to collecting and managing data on the sexual orientation and gender identity of youth in child welfare systems to explore challenges and successes in collecting, managing, and using these data.

- ***What models are available to enhance permanency outcomes for LGBT youth in care or young people at risk of child welfare involvement? How effective are these interventions?***

Through the Permanency Innovations Initiative, the Administration for Children and Families has funded the evaluation of one demonstration project designed to improve child welfare outcomes for LGBT youth. Future research could identify, document, and evaluate additional intervention models and system changes that focus on improving the safe and supportive identification of LGBT youth by child welfare agencies, helping families at risk of child welfare involvement address conflict related to a child's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, developing appropriate foster care placements for LGBT youth, and supporting LGBT youth who transition out of foster care.



TOPIC 4: PARTICIPATION OF LGBT ADULTS IN CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

Research Need:

Interactions of LGBT foster and adoptive parents with public child welfare agencies

Analyses of nationally representative survey data suggest that same-sex couples are more likely than different-sex couples to have an adopted or foster child. Yet LGBT people who wish to become foster or adoptive parents may face distinctive challenges in their interactions with child welfare agencies, including varying state laws and local attitudes regarding LGBT parenting and differing skill levels among agency staff in working with LGBT people. Some agencies target LGBT people in recruitment of foster and adoptive parents; research is needed to understand the results of these efforts.

Questions and Possible Approaches for Future Research

- ***What are the experiences of prospective LGBT foster and adoptive parents with public child welfare agencies?***

A qualitative study involving focus groups and interviews with a large sample of LGBT foster and adoptive parents (or prospective parents) in varied locations could explore perceptions of barriers and facilitators to working with public child welfare agencies and how these perceptions vary across locations and subpopulations, including transgender people and people of color. Studies also could explore perceptions of specific elements of the foster and adoption placement process, such as the home studies or pre- and post-adoption support services. A survey using purposive sampling methods might yield a large enough sample for quantitative analyses of differences across geographic locations or among male and female LGBT individuals and couples.

- ***To what extent and how effectively are child welfare agencies engaging LGBT adults as foster and adoptive parents?***

A survey of public child welfare agencies could assess the proportion of agencies that have completed foster placements or adoptions with LGBT parents, the characteristics of LGBT foster and adoptive parents and children placed with these families, and agencies' approaches to serving these populations. In-depth site visits or interviews with agency administrators could explore the implementation and results of recruitment efforts targeting prospective LGBT foster and adoptive parents.



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