

## LGBT POPULATIONS AND THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: A SNAPSHOT OF THE KNOWLEDGE BASE AND RESEARCH NEEDS

The social and legal environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the United States is changing rapidly. Despite these changes, existing research suggests that LGBT people, like some other minority groups, may face disproportionate risks to their economic and social well-being.

This brief summarizes the knowledge base and research needs related to LGBT people and child welfare programs. The brief address four topics: (1) the risk of child maltreatment for LGBT people, (2) the experiences of LGBT youth in child welfare programs, (3) the effectiveness of child welfare services for LGBT youth in foster care, and (4) the participation of LGBT adults in child welfare services as foster or adoptive parents. In general, research and data sources inclusive of LGBT populations are limited, and substantial knowledge gaps exist regarding LGBT people and child welfare programs.

### THE RISK OF CHILD MALTREATMENT FOR LGBT PEOPLE

Analyses of data from surveys with population-based and purposive samples suggest that LGB people are at increased risk for experiencing child maltreatment compared to non-LGB people. (No research is available to identify child maltreatment risk for people who identify as transgender.) For example, a meta-analysis of 37 school-based studies of adolescents, found that sexual minority adolescents were 3.8 times more likely to experience childhood sexual abuse and 1.2 times more likely to be physically abused by a parent or guardian compared to their heterosexual peers.<sup>1</sup> In other studies using varied samples, LGB adults retrospectively reported significantly higher rates of childhood maltreatment and abuse than did non-LGB men and women.<sup>3</sup> Additional research has found that high levels of gender nonconformity during childhood may increase risk for child maltreatment.<sup>4</sup>

*The Los Angeles Foster Youth Survey found that LGBT youth experienced more instability in foster care placements than do their non-LGBT peers.<sup>2</sup>*



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### Research needs.

Research on at least two topics is needed to expand understanding of the nature of child maltreatment risk among LGBT people:

***Risk of maltreatment among subpopulations of young LGBT people.*** Future studies could examine whether risks differ by sexual orientation and gender identity, race or ethnicity, timing of sexual orientation development, or other individual characteristics.

***Factors that increase or decrease risk of maltreatment for young LGBT people.*** Studies are needed to identify individual, family or community characteristics (such as family structure or community supportiveness for LGBT people) that affect risk for maltreatment.

## EXPERIENCES OF LGBT YOUTH IN CHILD WELFARE

Two surveys of youth in foster care support the notion that LGBT youth are overrepresented in foster care. The Los Angeles Foster Youth Survey, a study involving a random sample of youth in foster care ages 12 to 21 in Los Angeles County, found that 13.4 percent of respondents were LGB or questioning and 5.6 percent were transgender.<sup>5</sup> In the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (also known as the Midwest Study), which follows a sample of youth aging out of foster care in three states, 11 percent of participants were identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.<sup>6</sup> Participants in various studies reported that LGBT youth experience harassment in group care; expressions of discomfort, insensitivity, or rejection by child welfare agency staff and foster parents; and feelings of isolation.<sup>7</sup>

### Research needs.

Additional research is needed to fully understand the participation, experiences, and trajectories of LGBT youth in the child welfare system, including possible differences in experiences and outcomes between LGBT and non-LGBT youth. In particular, information is needed on:

***The number and characteristics of LGBT youth in the child welfare system.*** Data on the demographics of LGBT youth in care will help child welfare agencies make informed decisions about services for these populations.

***The safety and supportiveness of services for LGBT youth in foster care.*** Future research can examine whether and how the safety and supportiveness of care environments for LGBT youth differ by agency and location, type of

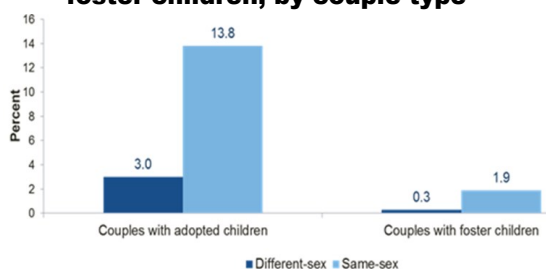
**According to some child welfare providers and experts, a substantial number of young people in foster care identify as LGBT.**

care, age of the youth, and other factors.

## EFFECTIVENESS OF CHILD WELFARE SERVICES FOR LGBT YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Over the past two decades, child welfare researchers and practitioners have developed and published recommendations for ensuring safe, supportive, and appropriate services for LGBT youth in child welfare settings.<sup>8</sup> Broadly speaking, recommended practices address four areas: (1) prohibiting discrimination against LGBT youth and ensuring they are respected, (2) increasing LGBT cultural competency among agency staff and foster parents, (3) providing child welfare services that address the specific needs of LGBT youth and their families, and (4) effectively managing information on the sexual orientation and gender identity of youth in the child welfare system.

**Percentage of couples with adopted or foster children, by couple type**



Source: Analyses of American Community Survey (2008–2011) by Gary J. Gates, Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law.

### Research needs.

Further research is needed to understand whether and how agencies are taking steps to improve services to young LGBT people and to assess the results of these efforts. Future studies could examine:

*The extent to which public child welfare agencies are taking steps to improve services for young LGBT people.* More information is needed regarding the successes and challenges agencies experience in making these changes.

*The implementation and effectiveness of interventions to enhance permanency outcomes for LGBT youth in care or young people at risk of child welfare involvement.* These interventions might aim to identify LGBT-friendly foster or adoptive families or help biological and foster/adoptive families address conflict related to sexual orientation and gender identity and decrease rejecting behaviors.

## PARTICIPATION OF LGBT ADULTS IN CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

The CB's 2011 information memorandum on LGBT youth in foster care notes that LGBT parents are a potential resource for child welfare agencies seeking to identify foster or adoptive families for children. In qualitative studies and surveys of purposive samples of lesbians and gay people, substantial minorities

**Analyses of nationally representative, population-based survey data suggests that same-sex couples are more likely to be adoptive or foster parents than different-sex couples.**



report challenges related to their sexual orientation in interactions with public child welfare agencies. These include legal insecurity due to state and local policies that may hinder adoption by same-sex couples and the possibility of prejudice or social stereotyping based on sexual orientation by agency staff and others involved in the foster care or adoption process.<sup>9</sup>

#### Research needs.

Additional research is needed to better understand how LGBT adults experience the child welfare system and strategies for better serving these populations. This research could explore:

***The interactions of prospective LGBT foster and adoptive parents with public child welfare agencies.*** Research is needed to clarify barriers that LGBT individuals and couples perceive to becoming foster or adoptive parents through public agencies and how they experience specific elements of the foster and adoption placement process.

***How effectively child welfare agencies are engaging LGBT adults as foster and adoptive parents.*** Little is known about the extent to which child welfare agencies have implemented practices intended to increase the accessibility and appropriateness of services for LGBT foster and adoptive parents and the results of these practices.

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**For  
more-detailed  
information and  
specific research  
suggestions,  
please visit the  
project webpage  
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<sup>1</sup> Friedman, Mark S., Michael P. Marshal, Thomas E. Guadamuz, Chongyi Wei, Carolyn F. Wong, Elizabeth M. Saewyc, and Ron Stall. "A Meta-Analysis of Disparities in Childhood Sexual Abuse, Parental Physical Abuse, and Peer Victimization Among Sexual Minority and Sexual Nonminority Individuals." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 101, no. 8, August 2011, pp. 1481–1494.

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<sup>3</sup> Austin, S.B., K.J. Conron, A. Patel, and N. Freedner. "Making Sense of Sexual Orientation Measures: Findings from a Cognitive Processing Study with Adolescents on Health Survey Questions." *Journal of LGBT Health Research*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2007, pp. 55–65.

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<sup>4</sup> Roberts, Andrea L., Margaret Rosario, Heather L. Corliss, Karestan C. Koenen, and S. Bryn Austin. "Childhood Gender Nonconformity: A Risk Indicator for Childhood Abuse and Posttraumatic Stress in Youth." *Pediatrics*, vol. 129, no. 3, 2012, pp. 410–417.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson. "Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Los Angeles County Foster Care: Assessing Disproportionality and Disparities."

<sup>6</sup> Dworsky, A. "Issue Brief: The Economic Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care." Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, January 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Berberet, H.M. "Putting the Pieces Together for Queer Youth: A Model of Integrated Assessment of Need and Program Planning." *Child Welfare*, vol. 85, 2006, pp. 361–384.

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<sup>8</sup> Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). "Recommended Practices to Promote the Safety and Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth and Youth at Risk of or Living with HIV in Child Welfare Settings." Washington, DC: CWLA, 2012.

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