

# Sexual and gender fluidity among homeless youth in Atlanta

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The negative social stigma surrounding homosexuality and gender-related deviance create special challenges for youth who “come out” as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ). In many communities in the U.S.A., social and political hostility toward LGBTQ people is strong. In a recent survey of homeless service providers from across the U.S., researchers affiliated with the Williams Institute at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) found that between 30 and 43% of the clients served by the agencies surveyed self-identified as LGBTQ. Moreover, they also reported that approximately half of these LGBTQ youth are homeless because they ran away or because they were rejected by their families for reasons related to their sexual and/or gender identity. While this recent research has increased public interest and policymakers’ concern about the plight of LGBTQ youth, there remains a serious paucity of detailed information about the sexual experiences and gender identity of homeless youth, particularly in the American Deep South. In this paper, we examine patterns of self-reported gender and sexual identity and sexual behavior in a sample of homeless youth. The data were collected in the summer of 2015 as part of the *Atlanta Youth Count and Needs Assessment* (AYCNA). The AYCNA was a community-wide effort to count, describe, and enumerate the needs of homeless youth ages 14-25 in the metro-Atlanta area. The survey included a brief, multidimensional series of questions designed to measure the youth’s gender and sexual identity and recent sexual activity, including involvement in sex work. Nearly one-third of our sample self identified as LGBTQ. Our analyses, however, suggest that the youth’s subjective gender/sexual identification, however, mask remarkable diversity in their sexual experiences and histories. While some of the variation is clearly a consequence of life “on the streets” (i.e., survival sex, sexual abuse; sex trafficking), our data and fieldwork suggest that this complex social environment challenges adolescent and young adults psychosexual development in important ways that stimulate sexual/gender fluid practices and greater psychosocial openness about gender and sexuality. Here, we describe these general patterns and discuss the implications of our findings for future research on homeless youth. We conclude by outlining a preliminary theoretical framework that seeks to explain how the social and physical environments and locations where urban homeless youth struggle to live create specific conditions that foster the development of a distinct urban sexual subculture, which, in turn, shapes these young people’s psychosexual development in unique ways.

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