Out of the Shadows
Supporting LGBTQ Youth in Child Welfare through Cross-System Collaboration
Introduction

For many youth in the child welfare system, especially those who identify as LGBTQ, ethnic and racial minorities or young people with disabilities, effectively addressing the root of disparities they face within and across multiple systems is important. Youth identifying as LGBTQ are overrepresented in child welfare, and they experience higher instances of homelessness, poor educational outcomes and youth probation. These overrepresentations are even starker for LGBTQ youth of color. The data on LGBTQ youth, particularly youth of color, presents a grim and disturbing picture about their experiences and outcomes.

Leaders and service providers in child welfare, health, mental health, education, housing and other systems have real opportunities to improve outcomes for youth through collaborative and interdisciplinary efforts. With research indicating clear relationships between multiple system enrollment, multigenerational involvement and overlap between target populations within each system, cross-systems approaches are needed to promote more effective and efficient practice implementation.

This report highlights the research on the disparities that exist between LGBTQ foster youth and their non-LGBTQ peers, as well as the compounding effects these factors have in relation to other intersecting factors including race, ethnicity, culture and language. It also discusses successful policy strategies and state examples of efforts that are addressing system and practice obstacles.
Throughout this paper, we use the term LGBTQ to be inclusive of all youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity. The term SOGIE is used throughout this paper to refer to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.

Terms Defined

**Sexual Orientation**
Sexual orientation is defined by whom a person is emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to.

**Gender Identity**
Gender identity means one's inner sense of oneself as male or female, both, neither or something else. This term refers to the gender with which one identifies regardless of one's sex assigned at birth.

**Gender Expression**
Gender expression is the communication of one's gender through behavior and appearance that is culturally associated with a particular gender.

**Lesbian**
A lesbian is a woman who is emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to other women.

**Gay**
We use the term gay to mean a man or woman who is emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to the people of the same gender; some use the term only to identify gay men.

**Queer**
Queer is an umbrella term for individuals who do not identify as heterosexual or cis-gender. Queer includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, pansexual, omnisexual, and identities that do not fall under dominant notions of sexuality and gender. Queerness is often in opposition to binarism, normativity and lack of intersectionality in the mainstream LGBT movement.

**Bisexual**
The term bisexual means a man or woman who is emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to both men and women.

**Transgender**
Transgender is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity differs from expectations associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. Transgender people may be heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian or any other sexual orientation.

**Questioning**
Questioning refers to a person, often an adolescent, who has questions about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Some questioning people eventually come out as LGBTQ; some don’t.

* For the purpose of this paper we use the term LGBTQ expansively in the broadest sense possible. There are many other acronyms that reflect the diverse range of sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions. However, we use LGBTQ to be uniform and to be brief. Language is constantly evolving, and so is this acronym. Through our work with youth and families we know that these categories are not always the most welcoming or appropriate terms. For example, youth may identify as gender queer or gender fluid. The term gender nonconforming or GNC is also frequently used in the field. Some youth with tribal affiliation identify as two spirited.
Children, Child Welfare & Trauma

Children and youth involved in the child welfare system are more likely to experience trauma than their peers who are not involved in child welfare.

This trauma occurs prior to entering care, as a result of being removed from their homes and communities, and sadly, also while in care. The disruptions, unaddressed needs and compounding trauma negatively impact young people’s outcomes. Compared with their peers who are not involved in the child welfare system, these youth are less likely to have a high school diploma, less likely to graduate from college, less likely to earn a living wage, more likely to have had a child at a young age and more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system (Courtney et al., 2007). Consequently, youth in foster care are more likely to be referred to and receive supportive services from agencies operating within one or more of these systems, including education, employment, housing, health care and family planning, probation/criminal justice and mental/behavioral health care. This overlap highlights the significant challenges experienced by young people involved with intervening public systems, and it also means that there is an imperative to develop solutions across these systems that better address young people’s needs. Strategies that include coordinated intersectional trauma-informed supports across systems are an important way to better address compounding disadvantages and to disrupt the path to poor outcomes. By collaborating across systems, opportunities to better serve young people begin to emerge. This is particularly important for young people of color who are disproportionally represented in each system independently.
Youth talked with us about their experiences as LGBT people of color in child welfare.

The stories and quotes used in this paper were taken from focus groups and individual interviews conducted across the country with youth of color who identify as LGBTQ and experienced child welfare involvement. Youth whose views were expressed in this process (N=53) were asked to share their experiences with child welfare including (but not limited to) elements related to their placement, ability to participate in affirming and support activities, education, safety, and health care. Their participation in either the focus groups or individual interviews was voluntary and contingent upon their understanding that their identity will remain confidential and the information they shared with CSSP staff and consultants regarding their experiences would be used by CSSP in written products and other forms of communication. Youth ranged in age from 18 to 31 and self-identified as black or African American (N=37), multiracial (N=8), Hispanic (N=5), Native American (N=1), Pacific Islander (N=1) and Native Aztec (N=1). About one-fifth of youth involved identified as transgender (N=5) or gender non-conforming (N=6); 13 youth identified as bisexual, 12 identified as gay, 14 identified as lesbian, 2 identified as pansexual, 1 identified as straight but was questioning and 2 elected not to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in 16 states and 20 jurisdictions. Vignettes in this paper were taken from nine jurisdictions in seven states. Geographical information regarding specific quotes has been changed to protect youth’s identity. The photographs in this paper are merely illustrative, and do not portray any youth who talked with us. Focus groups and interviews were conducted for the sole purpose of agency improvement and public policy reform and are not held as a representative study or research. Contact CSSP for additional information on our approach for collecting this information.