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**Where Did You Sleep Last Night?
Homeless Male Adolescents: Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Heterosexual
Compared**

Laura C. Hein PhD, RN, NP-C
College of Nursing
University of South Carolina
1601 Greene St. #420
Columbia, SC 29208
Email: Hein@sc.edu

Abstract

Background: Gay, bisexual, and transgender (GBT) youth are overrepresented among the homeless. Services exist for homeless youth; however, it is unclear if GBT youth access these services.

Objectives: To compare GBT and heterosexual homeless male youth on the factors leading to their homelessness, their service utilization, level of “outness” and where they choose to sleep.

Design: A comparative descriptive study was conducted in six large metropolitan areas. Seventy homeless male adolescents were interviewed (23 GBT and 47 heterosexual), between the ages 16 and 20 years old.

Results: Over one-third of GBT youth became homeless due to their sexual orientation/ gender identity, with the highest percentage among transgender youth. Gay and transgender youth were younger and were staying with friends or family. Heterosexual and bisexual youth were primarily staying in shelters.

Conclusions: Consideration of sexual orientation/ gender identity is important for nurses when conducting outreach, designing services or making policy decisions affecting homeless youth.

Keywords: Adolescent, homeless, sexual orientation, gender identity. LGBT, transgender

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Approximately 1.7 million adolescents are homeless in America each year,¹ and 40% are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT).^{2,3} Youth homelessness is a significant problem in America.⁴ Thousands of youth wander the streets, trying to blend in so as not to appear homeless, worrying about when they will next eat, and where they are going to sleep tonight. Some of these youth are homeless because of their sexual orientation/ gender identity.⁴ Their daily struggle for survival will likely persist into adulthood, unless a way is found to avert their continued homelessness.⁵ The objective of this study was to investigate the role of sexual orientation/ gender identity and amount of public disclosure of one's sexual orientation/ gender identity ("outness") in how male adolescents become homeless and where they stay.

Several terms that will be used in this discussion warrant defining. The terms "gay" and "lesbian" refer to an exclusive physical and emotional attraction to members of one's own sex. "Bisexual" refers to persons with physical and emotional attraction to members of both sexes. In addition, "transgender" refers to a person who feels his or her body is not the sex it should be (regardless of transformational hormone or surgical status).

Previous research on LGBT homeless adolescents has primarily focused on HIV-risk behaviors and substance abuse.⁶ This individual-centered perspective on youth homelessness ignores the context, which contributed to the homelessness of these youth.^{7,8} Additionally, there is little data comparing heterosexual and LGBT adolescents on how they become homeless or where they sleep once homeless. Additionally, little research on homeless adolescents has been conducted on samples where a subject's sexual orientation or gender identity has been asked.⁹⁻¹² Even fewer studies include transgendered persons in their sample.¹³

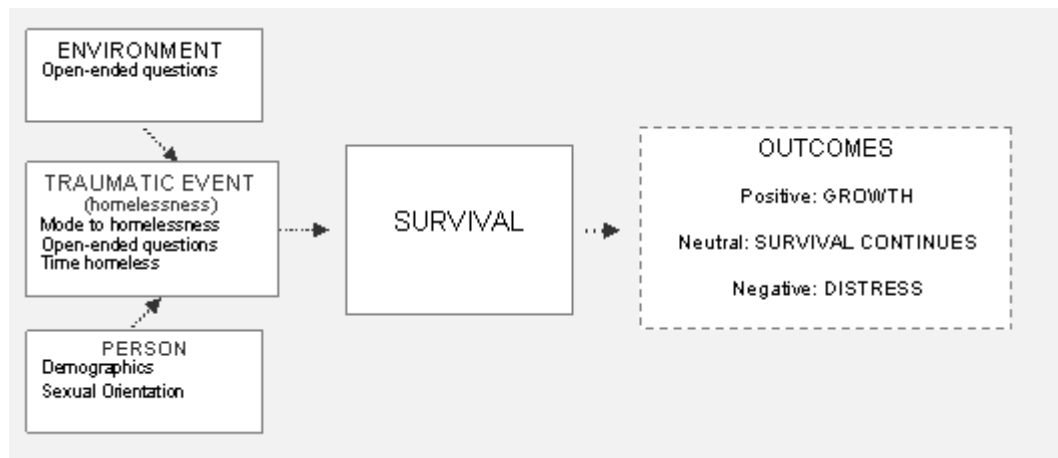
Although few studies allow for comparison between LGBT and heterosexual homeless adolescents, some differences have been found. Gay, lesbian and bisexual homeless adolescents are more likely to report sexual abuse by an adult caretaker,^{14,15} and sexual victimization on the streets than heterosexual youth.¹⁶ Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler and Johnson¹⁶ ($n=428$) also found differences between males of different sexual orientations: When compared to heterosexual males, gay males engaged in more survival sex, were more likely to meet diagnostic psychiatric criteria for major depression, and were less apt to meet criteria for conduct disorders or alcohol abuse. Walls, Hancock and Wisneski¹⁷ found 53% of LGBT homeless youth were physically or verbally abused by their families. In a study of southern homeless youth, Rew, Whittaker, Taylor-Seehafer, and Smith¹⁸ found significantly more gay and lesbian participants reported they were homeless due to parental sexual abuse, and more bisexual participants homeless due to physical abuse.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Conceptual Model

Although theories are available to guide research on LGBT adolescent homelessness,¹⁹ the bulk of the literature on this phenomenon is atheoretical. An adaptation of Dohrenwend's Ecological Model²⁰ of the Stress Process guided this study (*A Model of Male Adolescent Homelessness* - see Figure 1). The central tenet within the ecological paradigm is that an individual cannot be considered outside of the context within which they function.

Figure 1. The *Model of Male Adolescent Homelessness* is an adaptation of Barbara Dohrenwend's *Ecological Model of the Stress Process*.



A Model of Male Adolescent Homelessness (Figure 1) begins with a traumatic event, the experience of homelessness, which is influenced by person (individual) and environmental factors. Environmental aspects include one's family situation,²¹ spiritual community,²² and state and local laws and policies.²³ This traumatic event leads to a state of physical and emotional survival. Survival is to remain alive, to exist despite hardship or trauma. Over time, an individual may remain in a survival mode, decompensate to distress or begin to heal or grow. Survival is exerting intense effort to make it through another day – effort and energy that precludes psychological growth or betterment. Growth, survival and distress are theorized to be transiently mutually exclusive outcomes of survival and are not measured in this study. The utility of this model may be found in its depiction of youth homelessness as influenced not only by the youth, but by their environment (family, community, local/state policies etc.). As noted by Dohrenwend²⁰ acknowledgement of these external factors can lead to points of intervention (not depicted in Figure 1) to modify the environment (e.g. political changes) or an individual's particular circumstance (e.g. educational assistance).

No hypotheses were posited in this study due to the state of the science on homeless youth. Other studies have reported differences between male and female homeless adolescents^{24,25} therefore, this study was limited to males. Two

research questions compared GBT and heterosexual homeless male adolescents:

1. What are the natural histories of residential instability?
2. What are the relationships between mode to homelessness, sexual orientation/ gender identity, amount of disclosure of sexual orientation/ gender identity, and where youth sleep?

Each research question involves several concepts from the conceptual model. Question one evaluates the traumatic event and environment. Question two considers the traumatic event, person and survival.

Methods

A comparative descriptive study, using snowball sampling with gatekeeper access, was conducted across six large metropolitan areas: Los Angeles, California (n=15); Washington, D.C. (n=17); Indianapolis, Indiana (n=20); Cleveland, Ohio (n=8); Las Vegas, Nevada (n=4); and Nashville, Tennessee (n=6). These cities were selected because of the number of homeless youth known to be living there and access to gatekeepers in those cities. This study was Institutional Review Board approved with waiver of parental consent and waiver of written consent to protect the confidentiality of participant information.

The inclusion criteria were: 1) biologically male (i.e. “what sex would a doctor say you are?”); 2) 14 to 20 years old; 3) ability to speak and understand English; and 4) homeless for a minimum of one week. Exclusion criteria were: 1) stable housing; 2) being accompanied by a parent/guardian; and 3) obvious intoxication or mental instability – for the safety of the interviewer. Data were collected by a single investigator from 2004 to 2005 (n=70). Twenty-three participants self-identified as GBT, 47 as heterosexual. Within the GBT sample, 13 youth were gay, 6 bisexual, and 4 transgender.

Procedure

Study recruitment occurred through street-based interaction, with some recruitment at social service agencies. The investigator approached potential youth and screened them for eligibility via a brief informal conversation (sex, age, language, and amount of time homeless). Interviews were in a nearby coffeehouse or fast food restaurant. If not available, a park-bench, stoop, or any available place that offered a degree of privacy was used. Informed consent was obtained, a meal was purchased for the youth (or they received a fast-food gift card). and the interview was begun.

Instruments were administered in a semi-structured interview format. The interviews were *not* tape-recorded to protect participants, due to anticipated disclosure of some illegal activities. However, copious field notes were taken in

an attempt to record participant responses verbatim. At the termination of the interview, all participants received contact information for local homeless and GBT youth services. Additionally, each youth was given a city-specific Metro-transit card or tokens to facilitate use of local services. Interviews lasted 30 to 90 minutes depending on a particular participant's history.

Variables and Data Sources

Model constructs of Traumatic Event, Environment, Person and Survival - how you became homeless, and where they sleep at night were measured by asking questions such as: "What led to you leaving or being kicked out of your home?"; "Where did you sleep last night?" "Where was the most recent place you called home (i.e. group home, parent's house etc.)" etc. (additional specific questions are noted under the constructs to follow). Questions were fixed choice, Likert, and open-ended questions. The model constructs [Traumatic Event; Environment; Person; and Survival] will organize the remainder of this paper.

Traumatic Event. Traumatic Event variables were 1) how a youth became homeless (mode), 2) duration of homelessness; and 3) events contributing to homelessness. Entry into homelessness was determined via open-ended questions such as "What led to your leaving or being kicked out of your home?" If the mechanism to their homelessness was unclear, follow-up questions were asked for clarification.

Environment. Questions about the youth's environment included: "What is the best thing about your family?"; "What do you wish you could change about your birth family?"; and "What's the most recent place you called home?"

Person. Person-level variables assessed included age, sex, sexual orientation/gender identity and level of self-disclosure of sexual orientation/gender identity. Amount of disclosure of sexual orientation/gender identity to others, commonly referred to as "outing",²⁶ was self-reported in this study. Disclosure was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from closeted (no disclosure) to completely out (full disclosure of sexual orientation/gender identity to others). Heterosexual participants were scored as zero – not applicable.

Survival. Survival was measured via reported service utilization such as use of shelters, soup kitchens, drop-in centers etc.: "Where did you sleep last night?" "Please tell me about your friends or street-family"; "Who's been the most helpful to you now that you are on the street?"

Data Analysis

Open-ended responses were subjected to content analysis to determine categories for mode to homelessness and residential stability. Narrative was

distilled into core meaning (place, participants and volition).²⁷ Fishers Exact Test, Chi Squares, and ANOVA's were subsequently used to analyze the data.

Results

Description of the Sample: Person

The mean age of the sample was 19 years old (range of 16 to 20 years). Additional demographic information is displayed in Table 1. The mean distance youth had traveled between home and where they were interviewed was 259 miles (SD 639.63), range 0-2787 miles, mode of zero (same city). Considering distance traveled, 29% of the sample had traveled 60 miles or more since becoming homeless.

Education. Educational attainment was unrelated to sexual orientation/ gender identity. Despite having made it to their senior year, 1/5 of the sample reported they dropped out of high school as seniors. There were no differences in level of education by race, or ethnicity.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample by Sexual Orientation.

<i>Variable (%)</i>	<i>Total N=70</i>	<i>Heterosexual n=47</i>	<i>Bisexual n=6</i>	<i>Gay n=13</i>	<i>Transgender n=4</i>
<u>Race/ Ethnicity</u>					
Caucasian	29 (41%)	18 (38%)	2 (33%)	7 (54%)	2 (50%)
African American or black	37 (53%)	28 (60%)	2 (33%)	5 (39%)	2 (50%)
Other	4 (6%)	1 (2%)	1 (17%)	-0-	-0-
Hispanic	14 (20%)	8 (17%)	1 (17%)	4 (31%)	1 (25%)
<u>Education</u>					
No high school Diploma/ GED	28 (40%)	16 (34%)	5 (83%)	5 (39%)	2 (50%)

In high school / Working on GED	13 (19%)	8 (17%)	1 (17%)	3 (23%)	1 (25%)
High school Graduate/ GED	29 (41%)	22 (47%)	-0-	3 (23%)	1 (25%)

Note: Percentages represent the percentage of each group in a particular demographic. Race and ethnicity were participant designated and may represent dual identities.

Age. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 20 years of age. The mean age of the sample was 19 years old (SD 1.04). There were no significant relationships between age and sexual orientation. Age was correlated to amount of time homeless ($r=.27, p<.02$), and age when the youth became homeless was negatively correlated to duration of homelessness ($r= -.60, p<.001$).

Self-Disclosure of Sexual Orientation/ Gender identity. Coming out, or disclosing one's sexual orientation/ gender identity to others is an important milestone for sexual minority youth.²⁸ Relationships were observed between where youth were staying at the time of the interview and level of self-disclosure - with 83% of those staying in shelters identifying as principally heterosexual. Of the six GBT youth staying in shelters (3 bisexual, 2 gay, 1 transgender), 67% were hiding their sexual orientation/ gender identity at least some of the time. In contrast, no sofa-surfers reported being closeted (fully hiding their sexual orientation/ gender identity from others). Interestingly, those staying on the street reported either being heterosexual closeted, or fully out – perhaps feeling partial disclosure was not prudent.

Differences in level of self-disclosure of sexual orientation/ gender identity among the GBT orientations were observed. The only GBT orientation containing fully closeted individuals were bisexuals (50%). Of bisexual youth, 33% were mostly out, but *none* were fully out. All bisexual youth were hiding their sexual orientation to some degree (those sofa-surfing had self-disclosed the most). It is interesting that bisexual youth would choose to disclose their sexual orientation for this study, yet remain closeted in almost all other settings (per their own self-designation). In contrast, transgender youth (those most unable to pretend to be heterosexual due to their sex/gender incongruity in dress and mannerisms) were the most out. All transgender youth were out to some degree. Of transgender-identified youth, 75% were completely out (one was half out – known to be transgender to half of their associates, family and friends). Gay youth (92%) were mostly or fully out: 61% were fully out, 31% mostly out, and 8% half out. No significant differences in disclosure of sexual orientation/ gender identity were found between races or by ethnicity.

Traumatic Events and Environment: What Led to Homelessness

Research questions one and two will be addressed in the following paragraphs. Research question one reflects the narrative aspect of the study (what youth reported in their own words), and evaluates the traumatic event and the environment.

Table 2: Research Questions.

Research Questions
1. What are the natural histories of residential instability?
2. What are the relationships between mode to homelessness, sexual orientation/ gender identity, amount of self-disclosure of sexual orientation/ gender identity, and where youth sleep?

Question two reflects the quantitative aspect of these questions and considers the traumatic event, person and survival. Both quantitative and narrative data (questions one and two), will be reported together under the relevant model concept.

Youth became homeless for a number of different reasons. Although categories of *runaway* (37%), *throwaway* (30%), and *other sources* (33%) were considered, this framework limited the diversity of reasons why these youth became homeless and shrouded some of the real issues that led to their homelessness. Considering what led to homelessness by volitional source resulted in the following classification: youth source; parent source; system source; and tragedy. Table 2 depicts volitional source leading to homelessness by each sexual orientation/ gender identity. Percentages for sexual orientation/ gender identity and volitional source are provided.

Table 2: Volitional Source Leading to Homelessness.

<i>Mode to Homelessness</i>	<i>Total n =70</i>	<i>Hetero. n=47 (67%)</i>	<i>Bisexual n=6 (9%)</i>	<i>Gay n=13 (19%)</i>	<i>Transgender n=4 (6%)</i>
Youth Source	21 [30%]	15 (32%)	3 (50%)	3 (23%)	-0-
Parent Source	25 [36%]	13	2	7	3

		(28%)	(33%)	(54%)	(75%)
System Source	19 [27%]	15 (32%)	1 (17%)	2 (15%)	1 (25%)
Tragedy	5 [7%]	4 (9%)	-0-	1 (8%)	-0-

Youth source (30%)

Youth sources are behaviors and/or attitudes of the participants that resulted in homelessness. The highest percentage of youth citing their own behaviors as the proximal cause leading to their homelessness were bisexual (50%). Thirty-two percent of heterosexual youth, 23% of gay youth, and no transgender youth became homeless due to their own behavior. Of those reporting being *thrown out* of the home for incorrigibility, 75% were heterosexual.

The youth described their behaviors as follows: “drug use, anger, rage, I caused a lot of strife in the house”; another youth reported “it was my fault; I wasn’t going to school, just hangin’ out with my friends. I wasn’t following directions. My Mom said if you’re not working or going to school you need to leave”; another participant reported, “I had an apartment, but was kicked out of the apartment four and a half months ago for selling drugs.”

Parent source (36%)

A parent source involved behaviors of the parent(s) that led to a youth feeling threatened or harmed. Conflict with parents over their sexual orientation/ gender identity led to 35% of gay, bisexual and transgender youth becoming homeless (75% of transgender youth, 33% of bisexual youth, and 23% of gay youth). Youth were either thrown out of the house by their parents (*throwaway*: 13%, n=3; 1 gay, 2 transgender), or ran due to conflict over their sexual orientation/ gender identity (*runaway*: 22%, n=5; 2 gay, 2 bisexual, 1 transgender). As would be expected this was not an issue for any heterosexual youth.

These situations were described as follows: “my dad came at me with a 45 (gun), I can’t go back there”; another participant reported, “I was kicked out. My Dad passed away, and my Mom became super-strict. I was 17. I have a strict Islamic mother – we weren’t allowed to have potato chips. She found some in my gym bag and kicked me out.” A mentally retarded youth: “Mom and Dad ran out of money around when I turned 18 years old. So they started driving a truck cross-country. They dropped me off at a mission.” “Mom kicked me out because I was trans four years ago (he was 15 years old).”

System source (27%)

A system source is defined as a problem in the social service system that resulted in the youth not obtaining services. Only bisexual youth (17%, n=1) and heterosexual youth (2%, n=1) became homeless subsequent to gaps in the social service system. However, heterosexual youth (6%, n=3) and gay youth (8%, n=1, no transgender or bisexual) became homeless subsequent to aging out of the social service system. One heterosexual youth (2%) ran from social services subsequent to abuse by a foster parent. One youth reported: "I don't have any family – Mom left me at a hotel when I was two months old. My Dad took off. My adoptive parents abused and molested me. I got myself locked up (juvenile detention) to get out of the abusive situation at home – I was released to the street"; another youth reported "I was put in foster care at six years old, I was abandoned. I was kicked out (of the foster-care system) at 18 years old." Another youth reported, "My Mom killed my grandmother. I was 11 years old. My grandmother meant everything to me. Mom is dead. I stayed with my other grandmother for a year, then she died" (he reports social services did not intervene at any point), he continues, "I grew up on the streets. Every homeless person you see, I know. I've lived on these streets for years – the older homeless people helped keep me safe."

Tragedy (7%)

Tragedy refers to a situation where the youth became homeless without volitional involvement of any source: "I was living with my Mom when she passed away two years ago (he was 18 years old at the time), I couldn't pay the rent anymore." Another youth: "When I was 12 years old my Momma died, then my father walked out on us. My family gave me up soon as my Momma died."

Differences Among Groups by Mode to Homelessness

The specific reason leading to homelessness (e.g., abuse, incorrigibility), mechanism (runaway vs. throwaway vs. other), and volitional source (parent, youth, system, tragedy) were not significantly related to duration of homelessness (see Table 2).

Trends were observed for specific reason leading to homelessness by sexual orientation/ gender identity.

Heterosexual youth were more likely to have become homeless due to incorrigibility (32%), abuse/parent mental illness (21%), gaps in the social service system (17%), and tragedy (23%) than any other group. No significant relationships were found between mechanism or volitional source leading to homelessness, and sexual orientation/ gender identity. However, 35% of all GBT youth became homeless due to their sexual orientation/ gender identity, with the highest percentage among transgender youth. Considering volitional source-

youth choice and behavior (including incorrigible behavior on the part of the youth) only brought 30% of these youth to the street. Sexual orientation/ gender identity was an important factor in this study: 75% of transgender youth, 33% of bisexual youth, and 23% of gay youth became homeless due to their sexual orientation/ gender identity.

Survival: Where Youth Stay

Youth stayed in three types of places: Shelters, with friends/family – sofa-surfing, and on the street. Where youth stayed was determined by several factors such as their age, amount of time homeless and their sexual orientation/ gender identity. Sofa surfers (youth staying with various friends or family, sleeping on their sofa's) were significantly younger than youth either staying in shelters or on the street ($F=5.50, df=2, p<.006$). Figure's 2 and 3 depict where youth of different ages had slept the night before the interview.

Figure 2: Where Youth are Sleeping by Age.

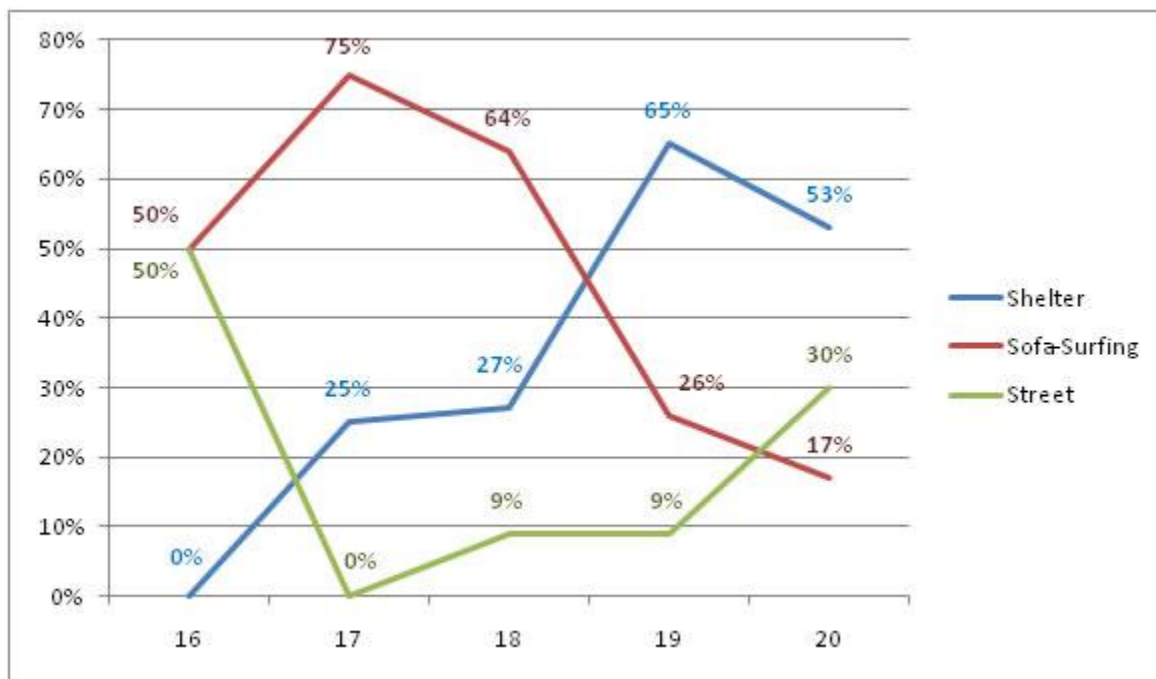


Figure 3: Where Youth of Different Ages are Sleeping

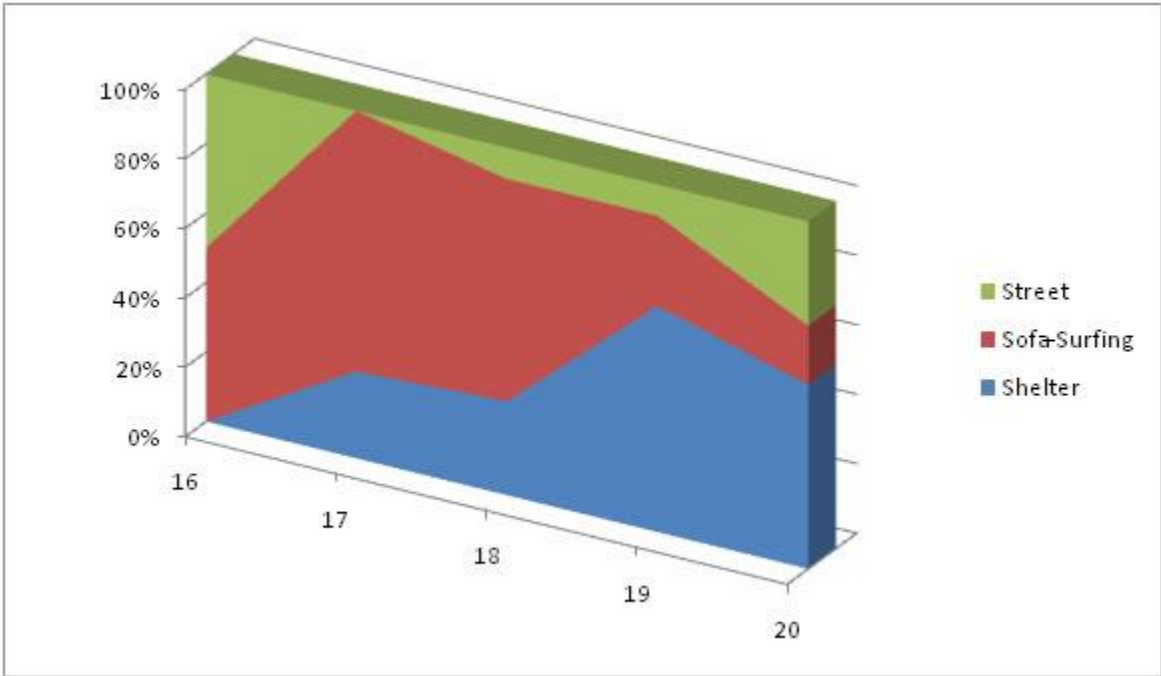
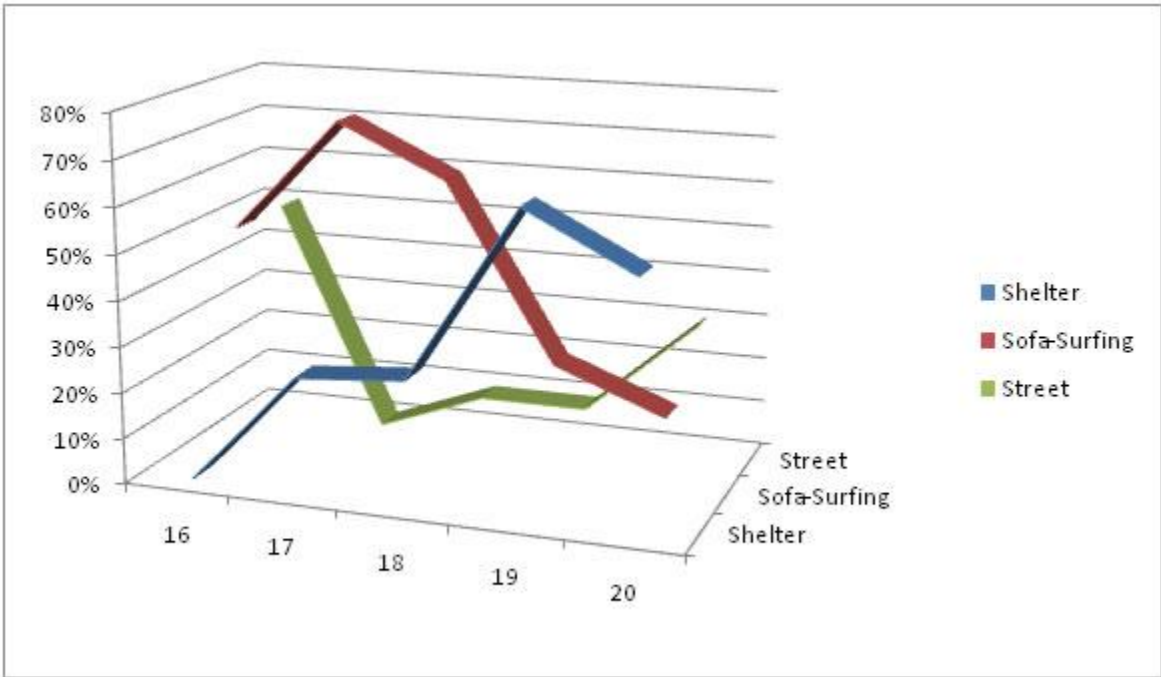
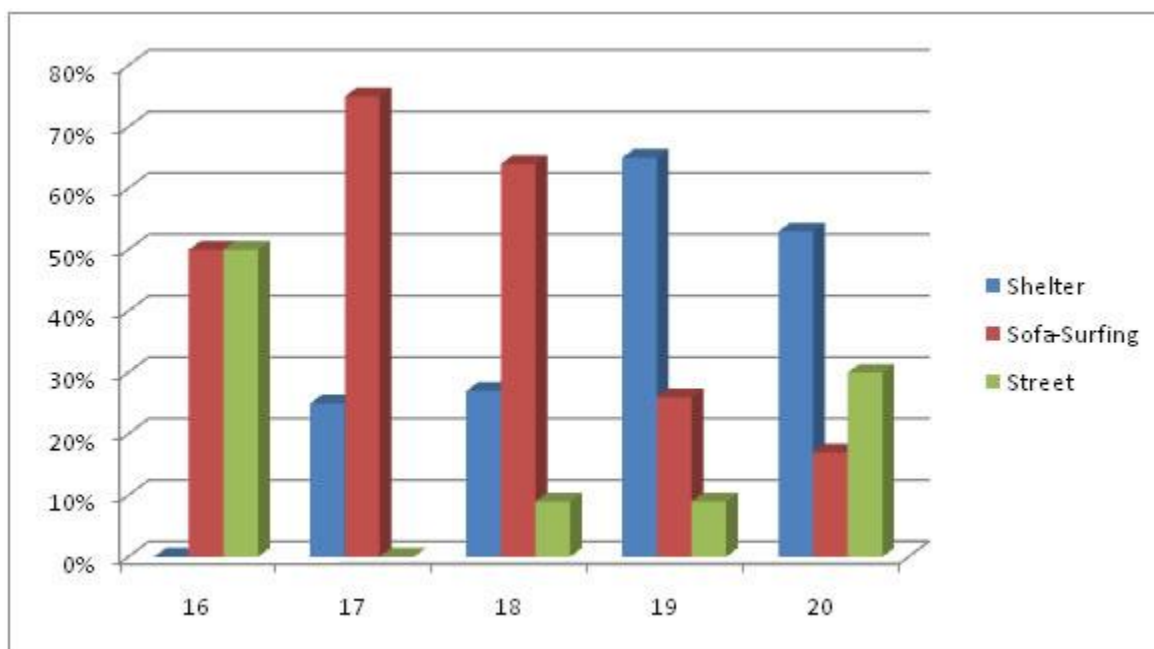


Figure 2: Where Youth of Different Ages are Currently Sleeping.





Discussion

Gay, bisexual and transgender youth are not a homogeneous group. Few studies include all sexual orientations/ gender identities as an option.²⁹ As was seen in this study, some findings were dependent on the particular sexual orientation/ gender identity of the individual, suggesting similarities between heterosexual and bisexual youth, and gay and transgender youth. Greene, Ennett, and Ringwalt⁹ found few GBT adolescents access or use homeless shelters, preferring alternative or street sites. This finding was supported by the current study in which the most closeted of GBT youth- bisexual youth (50%) were using shelters along with 64% of heterosexual youth. Consequently, exclusive sampling from shelters would likely miss most gay and transgender youth. Also of interest is that no gay or transgender youth chose to be completely closeted. It is possible some transgender youth may appear considerably more gender discordant,³⁰ and therefore may find it pointless to try to pretend to be heterosexual.

Strengths

Strengths of this study are inclusion of all male sexual orientations/ gender identities, street and shelter-based sampling across seven states in five regions of the United States, and the use of open-ended questions to elicit the experiences of youth in their own words.

Limitations

The findings of this study are based on a small volunteer sample. A greater number of heterosexual than GBT youth were recruited into this study. One

reason for this differential recruitment is GBT youth were principally sofa-surfing and not accessing homeless services. Therefore, unless involved in the LGBT community in some way there was no feasible way to identify GBT youth, resulting in smaller numbers of GBT than heterosexual youth recruited. The study used a volunteer sample, so it is possible some youth perspectives were not represented. However, only one qualified youth declined to participate. Additionally, the cross sectional nature of this study limits the ability to make causal inferences and prohibits conclusions about change over time.

Implications for Nurses

Homeless youth experience many barriers to obtaining assistance, these difficulties are likely more severe for gay, bisexual and transgender youth. Shelters can be non-accepting and dangerous to non-heterosexual youth.³¹ Some cities do not have youth shelters available without involvement of the social service or juvenile justice system. Minor emancipation is frequently unavailable or too burdensome for youth to realistically obtain. Without emancipation, minors cannot obtain legal employment, open a bank account, rent an apartment, or access healthcare for non-life-threatening conditions. Nurses can be pivotal to minimizing harm these youth experience by providing accurate healthcare information and referrals to safe and accessible resources. Future research is needed on the perceived needs of homeless LGBT adolescents, and facilitators and barriers to transitioning from homelessness. Additionally, information is needed on female homeless adolescents of different sexual orientations/ gender identities before effective LGBT interventions can be developed. These findings lend support to the need for public health nurses to look beyond homeless shelters and services if they are to reach homeless gay and transgender youth.

Homeless youth have mortality rates eleven times higher than non-homeless youth,³² higher hospital admission rates,³³ and use emergency departments for healthcare³⁴ at 2.6 times the rates of non-homeless persons.³³ Half of these youth may still be homeless when adults.⁵ It is imperative that public health nurses are aware of the issues surrounding LGBT adolescent homelessness to better assist these youth as they attempt to transition from homelessness, and to avert these long-term consequences.

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