LGBT Technology Partnership & Institute

Helping Homeless Youth Stay Connected

LGBT Tech
Connect 4 Life

Program & Research

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Making up about 40 % of the constituency of shelters and other homeless youth services (Durso & Gates, 2012), LGBT youth are overrepresented within the homeless population. Frequently ending up in the streets after family conflicts over sexual orientation or gender identity, homeless LGBT youth are more likely than their non-LGBT peers to

(a) experience physical and sexual abuse;
(b) experience mental health problems;
(c) abuse alcohol and drugs;
(d) engage in survival sex; and
(e) contract HIV and other STDs.

Researchers and youth service providers recognize the importance of addressing the unique needs of LGBT youth in intervention and outreach efforts. Given the ever-increasing importance of technology to our daily lives, scholarship is also beginning to note the potential of technological devices in improving intervention and outreach efforts. Research shows that communication and information technologies can provide critical assistance to homeless youth by helping them to

(1) keep in touch with supportive networks like family and friends and critical services like case workers and potential employers;
(2) gain access to preventative healthcare information on HIV and other STDs; and
(3) ensure their personal safety.

Understanding the importance of communication and information devices for homeless youth, the LGBT Technology Partnership & Institute (LGBT Tech) recently launched the Connect 4 Life program. In partnership with youth services organizations, mobile service providers and researchers, the program will distribute cell phones to homeless LGBT youth free of charge to improve their personal safety, health, and economic opportunity.

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Introduction

LGBT youth are not only overrepresented within the homeless population but also face unique challenges on the streets, with physical victimization, prostitution and drug abuse often being part of their daily experiences. Shelters and other service providers have begun to recognize the unique challenges of homeless LGBT youth and account for them in outreach and intervention efforts. More recently, scholars are noting the potential of technology in improving these efforts, with cellphones playing a vital role in keeping homeless youth stay connected to life saving services and opportunities. This white paper reviews current scholarship to discuss the unique experiences of LGBT homeless youth as well as the role of technology in the lives of the homeless. Based on the review of current scholarship, the paper outlines LGBT Tech's Connect 4 Life program as a model for leveraging this knowledge to improve personal safety, health, and economic opportunities for homeless LGBT youth.

LGBT Homeless Youth
Unique Struggles and Challenges

40%
OF
HOMESLESS
YOUTH
IDENTIFY
AS
LGBT

According to recent data by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2013), there are nearly 200,000 homeless children and adolescents under the age of 24 in the United States, of which 46,924 are being "unaccompanied" by a parent or other caretaker. As it is impossible to identify and account for every single homeless person, these estimates likely paint an overly optimistic picture of youth homelessness in our country. While LGBT individuals only make up about 4% of the general population (Gates, 2011), LGBT youth are overrepresented within the homeless population. A joint report by the Palette Fund, the True Colors Fund and the Williams Institute finds that about 40% of constituents served by homeless youth services identify as LGBT (Durso & Gates, 2012). Most of these young people end up in the streets after family conflicts over sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g., Durso & Gates, 2012; Reck, 2009; Whitbeck et al., 2004). Homeless LGBT youth are also more likely than non-LGBT youth on the streets to have experienced physical and sexual victimization (e.g., Cochran et al., 2002; Whitbeck et al., 2004) and alcohol and substance abuse in the home (e.g., Cochran et al., 2002; Tyler & Cauce, 2002).

Homeless LGBT children and youth not only account for a comparably large portion of the homeless youth population, but also encounter unique challenges on the streets. For instance, homeless LGB youth are more likely than non-LGB youth to become victims of physical and sexual abuse (Cochran et al., 2002; Tyler, 2008). LGB street youth are also at greater risk of experiencing mental disorders like depression or post-traumatic stress and are more likely to

attempt suicide (Gangamma et al., 2008). Given the higher rates of emotional and mental health issues experienced by homeless LGB youth, it comes as little surprise that these young people are also more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs (Salomonsen-Sautel et al., 2008). To meet basic needs like food or shelter, LGB youth are also more likely to engage in survival sex (e.g., Marshall et al., 2010; Walls & Bell, 2011), often without taking appropriate steps to protect themselves from STDs. Along with other factors, this greater likelihood of engaging in unprotected sex puts them at higher risk of contracting HIV and other STDs (Marshall et al., 2010; Tyler, 2013). In this context, young gay males are significantly more likely than heterosexual males to engage in survival sex (e.g., Gangamma et al., 2008; Hein, 2011). While some studies suggest that lesbian and bisexual women are more likely than heterosexual women to engage in survival sex (e.g., Walls & Bell, 2011), Gangamma (et al., 2008) find no significant differences between the two groups. However, the scholars conclude that lesbian and bisexual women are among the most vulnerable groups when it comes to HIV infection (Gangamma et al., 2008).

A limited number of studies highlight the unique challenges experienced by homeless LGB youth of color. These young people are not only slightly more likely to have encountered "stressful life events" like discrimination or illness, but are also at greater risk of experiencing depression than their white peers (Rosario et al., 2011). Walls and Bell (2011) further indicate that African-American and LGB homeless youth are more likely than other youth to engage in survival sex. Despite these additional challenges encountered, research concludes that homeless LGB youth of color are less likely than white youth to resort to drug abuse (e.g., Salomonsen-Sautel et al., 2008).

Despite the vulnerability of the transgender community, little research exists that addresses the unique challenges encountered by transgender and gender nonconforming[1] youth on the streets. Frequently based on modest sample sizes, these studies allow for only limited conclusions about the experiences of homeless transgender youth. Homeless shelters, considered a safe haven by many homeless youth, frequently fail to provide the physical or regulatory infrastructure necessary to make homeless transgender youth feel safe and welcome (e.g., Mottet & Ohle, 2006). To survive on the streets, transgender youth frequently resort to survival sex to meet basic needs like food or shelter (Grossman & D'augelli, 2006; Hein, 2011). In a more general context, transgender people are frequent targets of physical and sexual abuse (e.g., Grossman & D'augelli, 2006), are at greater risk of attempting suicide (e.g., Grossman & D'augelli, 2007) and are among the most vulnerable groups when it comes to HIV infection (e.g., Herbst et al., 2008; Valleroy et al., 2000). Research accounting for the intersection of gender identity and race/ethnicity finds that transgender people of color are at even greater risk of contracting HIV (e.g., Garofalo et al., 2006). Given the unique challenges encountered by homeless transgender youth, these issues are likely to be exacerbated on the streets.

Our **Lesbian Gay** and **Bisexual Homeless Youth** Are At Greater Risk When It Comes To Their Health Than Other Homeless Populations.

1 The National Center for Transgender Equality (2014, para. 2) defines transgender as "a term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth," gender nonconformity refers to "individuals whose gender expression is different from societal expectations related to gender" (para. 11).

While scholarship is beginning to turn attention to the challenges faced by homeless LGBT youth, a review of current research reveals that existing studies allow for only limited insights into the experiences of this vulnerable population. With a majority of studies focusing on young LGB people, not enough attention is given to unique challenges experienced by transgender and gender nonconforming youth. At the same time, a majority of studies do not account for differing experiences at the intersections of sexual orientation, gender identity and race/ethnicity. Geographic focus and sample size also raise questions of generalizability. Primarily focusing on youth in metropolitan areas, no attention is given to homeless LGBT youth in rural areas. As a majority of research is based on comparably modest sample sizes, existing studies provide a narrow and ultimately incomplete view into the lives of America's homeless LGBT youth.

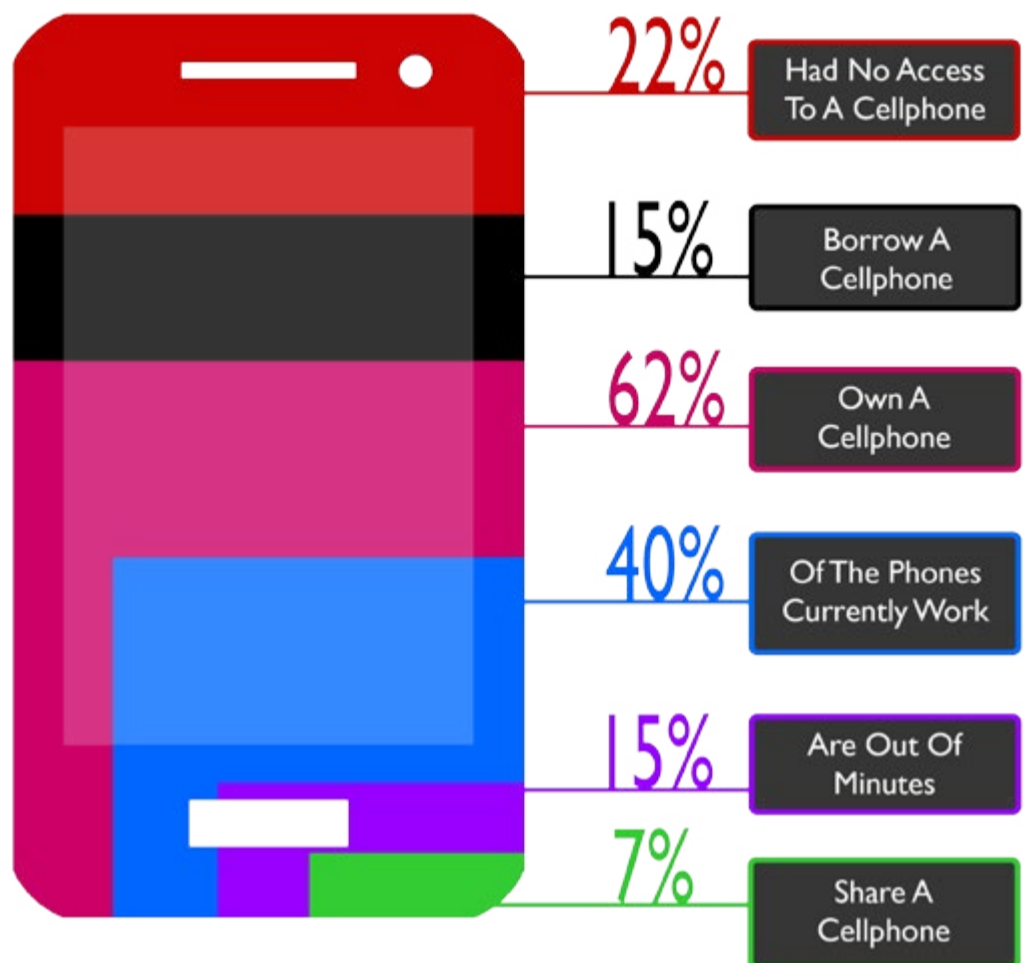# The Vital Role of Technology in the Lives of Homeless Youth

Internet technologies provide LGBT youth with a vital tool to come to terms with their identity and find community (Gray, 2009). For homeless LGBT youth, communication technologies are of even greater importance, helping them stay connected with supportive networks and enhancing personal safety. Studies conducted among a sample of adolescents in Los Angeles find that communication technologies are critical for the physical and mental wellbeing of homeless youth. In contrast to those primarily engaging in face-to-face communication with other homeless youth, adolescents keeping in touch with family and friends by means of technology were less likely to abuse alcohol and drugs (Rice et al., 2011a). Similarly, Rice (et al., 2012) finds that street youth who use technology to connect with family and friends from home were less likely to experience depression than those primarily engaging in face-to-face relationships with other homeless adolescents. In the context of preventative health services, online information on HIV and other STDs has found to be especially effective among homeless youth (Barman-Adhikari & Rice, 2011; Keuroghlian et al., 2014).

While scholarship is starting to recognize the potential of the Internet and other technologies to help street youth stay connected to supportive networks, we still know little about the technology use of this vulnerable population. A non-representative study conducted among a sample of adolescents in Los Angeles provides insight into how the Internet is used by homeless youth to stay connected with social networks (Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014). According to the study's results, public libraries (47%) and service agencies (40%) were the main sites granting access to the Internet. The main reason for homeless youth's Internet use was keeping in touch with social networks, with email (64%) and social media (57%) playing a vital role in staying connected. While email was primarily used to communicate with

family, caseworkers and prospective employers, social media was the primary means of communication with friends.

Mobile connectivity plays a central role in the lives of homeless youth. A study conducted among a sample of homeless youth in Los Angeles finds that 62% of adolescents owned a cellphone (Rice et al., 2011b), though only 40% of those surveyed owned a working phone and 15% reported that they were out of minutes. While some of the adolescents had access to a shared (7%) or borrowed (15%) phone, 22% did not have any form of access. The cellphones were vital in staying in touch with parents (41%), other family members (43%) and friends from home (51%) and to access critical services. Homeless youth not only used their cellphones to keep in touch with their case workers and other agencies (17%), but also to contact current (12%) and prospective employers (24%). The ability to connect with potential employers has significant potential in improving the economic situation of homeless youth and others living below the poverty line. In this context, a study assessing the impact of subsidized wireless service through the federal Lifeline program[2] finds that the program could help yield a total income of $3.7 billion for qualified participants (Sullivan, 2011). Research also indicates that cellphones play a vital role for the personal safety of homeless youth, allowing them to locate safe shelters, call for help in emergency situations and document incidents of harassment (Palzkill Woelfer et al., 2011).

Mobile Connectivity for Homeless Youth in LA

22% — Had No Access To A Cellphone
15% — Borrow A Cellphone
62% — Own A Cellphone
40% — Of The Phones Currently Work
15% — Are Out Of Minutes
7% — Share A Cellphone

Rice et al., 2011b

LGBT Tech's Connect 4 Life
A Cellphone Program for Homeless LGBT Youth

One of the most vulnerable populations in the street, homeless LGBT youth have perhaps one of the greatest needs to stay connected. While limited research suggests that homeless LGB youth are more likely to own a cellphone than non-LGB street youth (Rice et al., 2011b), keeping that phone operating and

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2 Since a reform to the federal Lifeline program in 2005, low-income individuals in the United States can qualify for a $9.25 discount on their cellphone plans. To qualify for reduced wireline or wireless service, individuals need to prove an income below 135% of the federal poverty line or participation in a public assistance program like Medicaid or food stamps (FCC, 2014a). In January 2012, Lifeline underwent a reform "to ensure the availability of communications to all Americans" (FCC, 2014b, para. 7). The reform also includes a pilot program seeking to facilitate broadband use among Lifeline participants (FCC, 2014b).

maintaining enough minutes to make it useful can be a significant challenge. Given the importance of connectivity in the lives of the homeless, it comes as little surprise that some may even relinquish food stamps in order to keep their phones operating (Richards & Smith, 2006).

Understanding the need for homeless youth to stay connected, the LGBT Technology Partnership & Institute recently announced the launch of the cellphone program Connect 4 Life. The program is based on the hypothesis that providing homeless LGBT youth with mobile devices and subsidized service plans will improve the personal safety, health, and economic opportunity of these vulnerable young people. In the coming months, LGBT Tech will work closely with youth service organizations, mobile service providers and researchers to develop a pilot program to prove this hypothesis, providing a limited number of LGBT youth with free cellphones and subsidized connectivity. The pilot will run in three American cities, with Washington, D.C. being the first. LGBT Tech is currently identifying mobile handset providers and network operators that will partner in providing homeless LGBT youth with cellphones and subsidized mobile service.

A group of researchers will be responsible for monitoring the pilot program and report any required modifications. With the cellphone program, LGBT Tech not only wants to provide homeless LGBT youth with a limited number of free minutes and texts, but also understands the importance of Wifi access to locate shelters and other safe spaces (Palzkill Woelfer et al., 2011). An integrated app will allow participants to locate shelters and other safe spaces. To kick off Connect 4 Life, LGBT Tech is currently organizing a Social Hackathon that invites a selected number of policymakers, researchers and industry leaders to work out the details of the pilot program.

Conclusion

For homeless youth on the streets, owning a cellphone cannot only be a matter of life and death, but is also vital in connecting with supportive networks, service providers and prospective employers. This is particularly important for LGBT youth, who are overrepresented in the homeless population and face unique challenges on the streets. Many outreach and intervention programs have begun to account for the unique experiences of LGBT youth, but technology (and mobile technology in particular) can significantly improve the effectiveness of these efforts. LGBT Tech's Connect 4 Life program will break new ground by leveraging mobile technology to improve public safety, health and economic opportunity for one of the most vulnerable groups on the street.

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