



Supporting LGBTQI Youth in the Prison Abolition Movement

The Research Hub for Youth
Organizing at University of
Colorado Boulder



NO KIDS IN PRISON

*“We are powerful
because we have survived.”*

Audre Lorde

Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, gender nonconforming and transgender (LGBTQI) youth are well documented as disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system. These disparities, coupled with the high visibility of LGBTQI youth as leaders amongst prominent campaigns to abolish the youth prison model, emphasize the importance of examining the concerns facing LGBTQI youth involved in the prison abolition movement, and the strengths they bring to the effort.

This report synthesizes findings from three sets of sources with recommendations and guidance to support this population of young people. Given that the disproportionate negative outcomes experienced by LGBTQI youth in the prison system, this report makes the case for approaching the academic literature with an understanding of intersectionality, in order to support LGBTQI young people involved in a broad range of social movements. This report also serves to highlight ways in which these young people are well poised to become powerful change agents in the movement to end the failed youth prison model.



Intersectionality: Kimberle Crenshaw, a legal scholar, created a term to describe our multiple identities: intersectionality. Crenshaw explains that our identities are like traffic flowing at an intersection – one identity may flow in one direction while another identity is flowing in a different direction. It includes the combined effects of one’s multiple identities, which includes identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and employee status

Studies of LGBTQI Youth in the Prison System

When considering the role of LGBTQI young people in this movement, it is crucial to name the measurable disparities they typically experience. LGBTQI youth, particularly LGBTQI youth of color, face discrimination and stigma that routinely lead to criminalization and increased interactions with law enforcement and the criminal justice system. LGBTQI young people disproportionately experience home insecurity related to rejection from family members, representing up to 40% of the homeless youth population¹, and 19 percent of youth ages 12-21 in foster care², despite making up less than 10% of the population. LGBTQI youth also experience harsher punishments (suspensions and expulsions) in school³, and those who are pushed out of school are more likely than their non-LGBTQI peers to have contact with the police.⁴

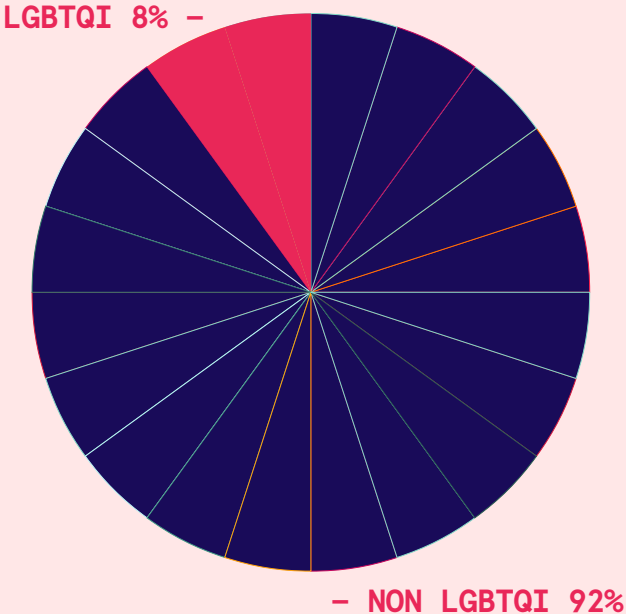
While they are estimated to make up 9.5 percent of the general youth population in America, research shows that 20% of youth in the juvenile justice system are LGBTQI.^{5,6} The overrepresentation becomes more pronounced for girls: 40-50% of girls in the justice system are LGBTQI.⁷ In addition, 85% of all LGBTQI youth in the justice system



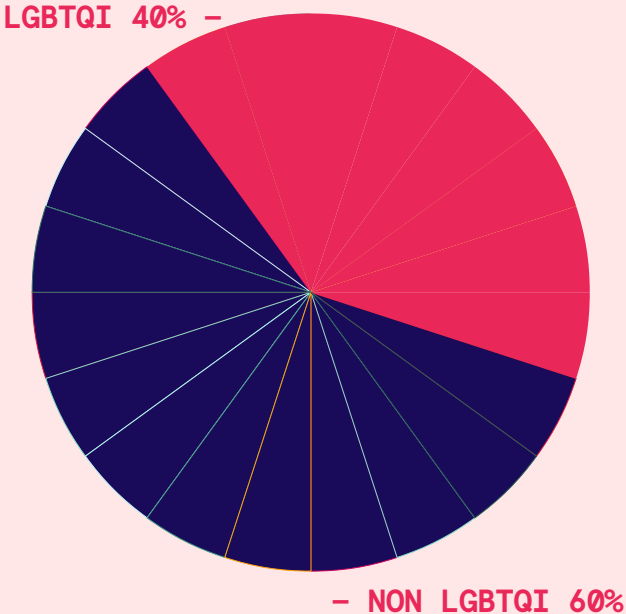
Reporting of this data requires youth to be comfortable and presented with the opportunity to disclose their LGBTQI status. Thus, the accuracy of this data is questionable. Even if youth disclose their LGBTQI status, systems often lack the ability to document it or fail to document it accurately. We can assume that these numbers are higher than reported due to these concerns.

are of color.⁸ This mirrors national statistics showing that black youth are four times as likely as white youth to be incarcerated, Latino youth are 28% more likely to be incarcerated, and Native American youth are more than three times as likely to be incarcerated.⁹

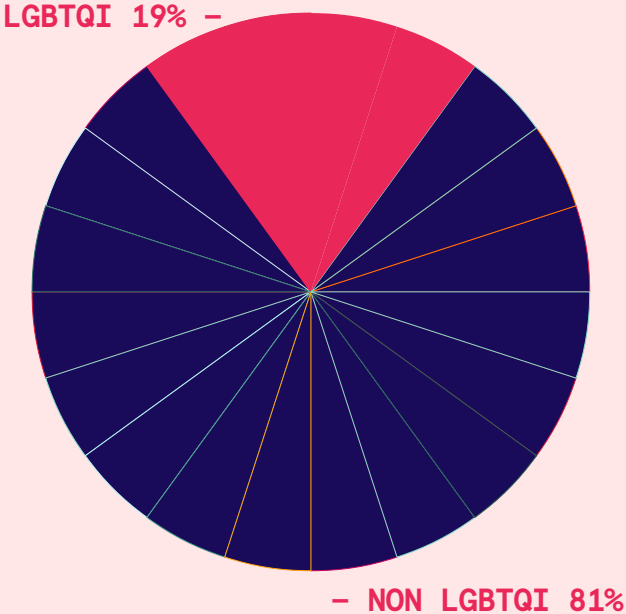
General Population



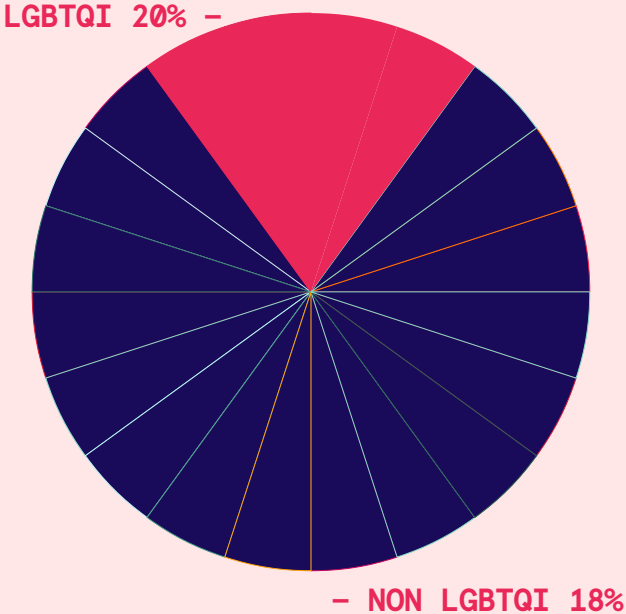
Homeless



Foster Care



Involved in Prison System



Harms Inflicted Upon LGBTQI Youth in Carceral Settings

Incarcerated LGBTQI youths face high incidence of harassment, emotional abuse, physical and sexual assault, and prolonged periods spent in isolation. For example, for LGBTQI youth, 15% of boys and 4.6% of girls report sexual contact with staff, compared with 8.9% of boys and 2.2% of girls who are incarcerated and do not identify as LGBTQI.¹⁰ Similar disparities are reported for peer sexual assault, with LGBTQI youth reporting rates of 20.6% among boys and 6.7% among girls, compared to 1.9% (boys) and 4.1% (girls) among non-LGBTQI youth.³

The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) set some basic standards for the positive treatment of incarcerated youth (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth and intersex youth). However, despite PREA's standards, placement decisions rarely take into account gender identity or expression. For example, a review of state laws and policies found that forty states lack juvenile justice system standards permitting youth to dress and express themselves in accordance with their gender identity.¹¹ Common practices often focus on placing gender nonconforming young people in isolation for their "protection," despite evidence of the negative impacts of isolation¹².

All of these factors together demonstrate a critical problem within the system, a system that we know from many of these researchers and reports, is rife with racism, injustice and abuse¹³. LGBTQI youth face many of these same forms of discrimination both inside and outside the prison system, and one of the most basic takeaways is that our society has a long way to go in respecting, supporting, and caring for these young people. We know that involvement in the youth justice system leads to negative outcomes throughout a person's life. From the inability to obtain secure housing, steady employment, or proper medical care, system involvement becomes a risk factor for future negative life outcomes.

Studies of LGBTQI Youth Organizers

While there is ample research demonstrating the disproportionate abuse experienced by LGBTQI youth in the prison system, what is less clear are the experiences of LGBTQI youth organizers working to end the prison system. There have been relatively few studies of this group directly, although some ideas can be inferred from research on LGBTQI youth organizing around other issues. What follows is a discussion of key studies and the central concepts that might inform a future expanded investigation into this population's needs.

Many LGBTQI young people are prominent in today's organizing around abolishing the youth prison model. And considering the fraught nature of discrimination, harassment and identity disclosure, many more are likely involved in less visible roles. In the case of LGBTQI youth organizing against the prison system, we know from the reports cited that there is a high likelihood that they have experienced discrimination, abuse, and isolation. Additionally, each of these reports point to the factor of being denied one's identity as a critical negative factor these young people experience at home, at school, in the workplace, and certainly in the prison system. Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of prison abolition organizations, campaigns, grassroots projects, and collective actions by-and-for LGBTQI people of color. A study from Hereth and Bouris in 2020 highlighted three powerful examples of this work in action and discussed some of the features of these organizations¹⁴:

- **BreakOUT!** is a New Orleans-based organization dedicated to addressing the criminalization of LGBTQI youth of color and has a goal to dismantle the criminal legal system. To achieve this mission, BreakOUT! disrupts various pathways by which LGBTQI youth of color enter the criminal legal system. This work includes offering know-your-rights trainings, a general education diploma or high school equivalency certificate program, and healing spaces designed to promote resiliency and offer social support. BreakOUT!'s youth organizers engage directly with the criminal legal system to change the broader social conditions that heighten the likelihood of criminal legal system contact and interrupt the police profiling pathway that funnels many LGBTQI youth of color into the criminal legal system.

- **The Transformative Justice Law Project (TJLP) of Illinois** is a volunteer-run collective that provides abolitionist legal services to transgender and gender nonbinary youth and adults. In addition to providing free criminal defense, one of TJLP's largest projects is the Name Change Mobilization. Many transgender individuals experience discrimination because their gender expression and chosen name do not match what is listed on legal identification documents. Once a month, attorneys and trained volunteers hold a clinic at the Cook County Clerk's office in Chicago to assist transgender and gender nonbinary youth and adults with filing paperwork to change their names and gender markers. Obtaining a legal name change can interrupt several pathways by which transgender and gender nonbinary youth enter the criminal legal system; these interruptions include reducing barriers to employment, educational and housing, as well as potentially lessening the harm of transphobic discrimination during interactions with the police.
- **Black & Pink** is a grassroots organization supporting incarcerated LGBTQI individuals through advocacy, education, direct service, and public education. Black & Pink works with incarcerated LGBTQI individuals of all ages, however, their research and advocacy work is explicitly focused on ending the social conditions that have contributed to the buildup of the prison nation, including the conditions and policies that funnel LGBTQI youth into prisons. They research, issue and lobby around policy recommendations that directly address many of the pathways that ensnare LGBTQI youth, especially youth of color, in the criminal legal system. These include (1) passing a gender and sexuality inclusive version of the Ending Racial Profiling Act, (2) ending "quality of life" policing practices, (3) decriminalizing sex work, (4) shifting funds away from the police to support affordable and accessible housing for those most impacted by homelessness and incarceration, and (5) ending the practice of arresting people under age 18.

A study from Terriquez in 2015 looked closely at the experiences of LGBTQI youth organizers in social movements.¹⁵ This research team conducted a survey of 500 activists and interviews with a subset of 50 of the individuals. Out of this research, the findings included that LGBTQI youth were more civically active on average than their peers who did not identify as LGBTQI. Specifically, LGBTQI activists reported membership in more civic organizations (3.0 on average) than did non-

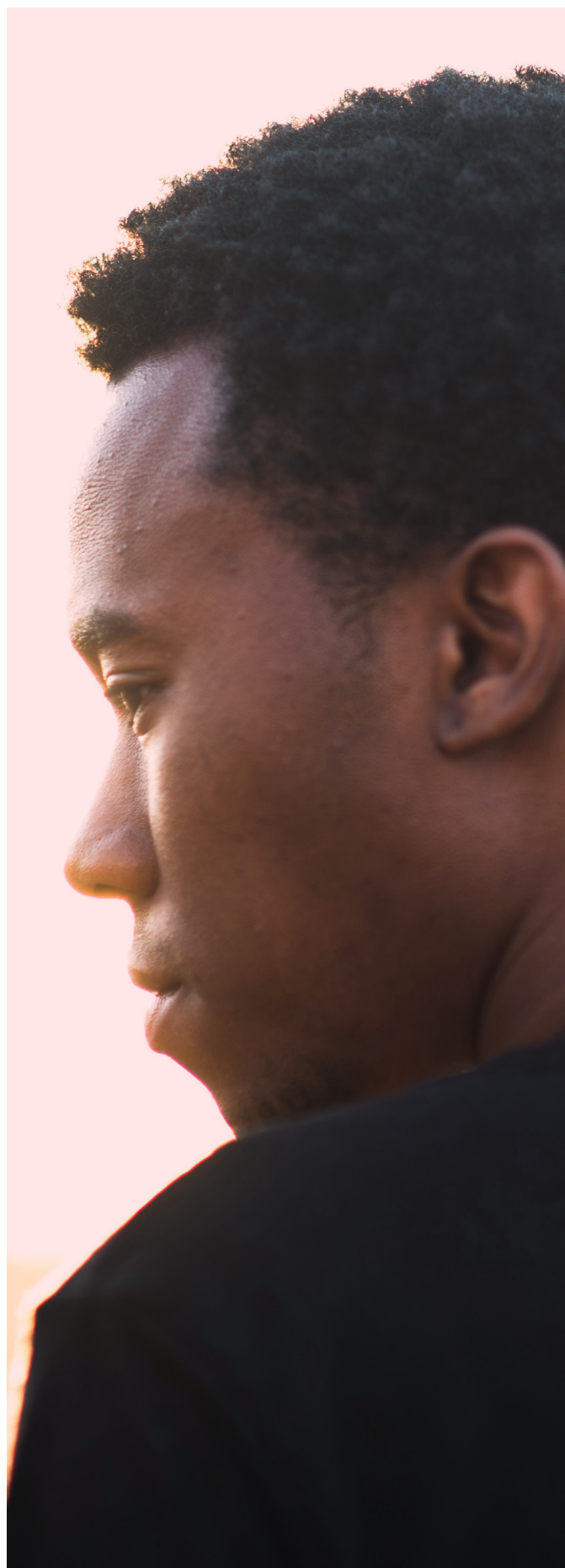
LGBTQI activists (2.4 on average). One emerging theory is that critical consciousness develops across identities, and deeply connected with the types of injustice and discrimination these young people face daily. Following this line of analysis points to the strength of LGBTQI critical consciousness as a source of strength for any social movement and as Terriquez optimistically notes, “Social movements can actively aim to create a shared identity in order to equip participants with tools to develop congruence between their individual and collective identities.”¹⁶

In contrast to these notable positive findings, the authors also paid particular attention to the challenges these activists face when disclosing their sexual and gender identities. Activists did not find it easy to disclose their identities to peers, fellow organizers, and especially family members. The reasons are not surprising, including fear of violence and exclusion from social groups. This presents challenges for their desire to feel completely integrated across the multiple facets of their lives and the communities through which they travel.

Another study in 2018 states that “queer solidarities,” activism demands that recognition and belonging sit beside demands for redistribution and participation.¹⁷ This research echoes many of the 2015 findings from Terriquez, who suggests that LGBTQI identities can be used as social navigational tools for individuals to create solidarity within social movements. This 2018 study involved findings from a survey of 5680 young people and key findings included that LGBTQI youth are disproportionately impacted by issues such as housing insecurity, bullying and harassment, and police aggression. Across these dimensions LGBTQI youth of color were most impacted.

LGBTQI young people across the country are primed for activism.¹⁸ They noted that these young people are highly engaged in a range of social movements and activist strategies across many topics. They explore a number of important implications this has on the well-being of these young people. For example, discrimination and bullying are indeed both associated with indices of poorer health: higher levels of psychological distress and suicidal ideation along with poorer levels of self-rated health. In contrast, activism is positively associated with all three indicators of health. The authors note that in this form of action and life path, LGBTQI youth are engaging in “deliberate and delicate interruptions” that build protective factors to their negative experiences and establish circles of care and community.

Research has demonstrated that LGBTQI youth draw upon their experiences to be powerful organizers and leaders in social movements. Sources that speak directly to the prison abolition movement are still nascent, but we can infer that queer youth may not find it safe to disclose all aspects of their identities, even in spaces that are organized around progressive causes. However, they are still on average more civically active than their peers and there are indicators that point to their lived experiences as LGBTQI people as strengths they bring to civic activity. Furthermore, research has emphasized the importance of embracing an intersectional¹⁹ understanding of identity, especially in relation to emerging activist identities. There is no simple way to understand LGBTQI youth as activists and organizers without considering the overlapping dimensions of inequity they experience, be they related to race, class, gender, sexual orientation or other identity categories. Individual young people step into the movement carrying experiences informed by each layer of their identity, as well as the context and the systems they encounter. One clear takeaway from this research, when considering supporting LGBTQI organizers, is to take an active stance toward building spaces in organizing that affirm identities and recognize that identities are intersectional and fluid..



Testimonials from LGBTQI Youth in the Prison Abolition Movement

Initial intentions for this paper included holding visioning focus groups to discuss what a more supportive space within the movement could look like. Recruiting willing participants for that conversation proved to be a challenge and could point to the justified fear experienced by LGBTQI young people in disclosing their identities.

In place of the visioning focus groups, we were able to have individual conversations that resulted in brief testimonials. These testimonials speak to what support might look like in this organizing space. While the small sample size of these responses cannot be systematically analyzed or generalized, they echo many of the findings from prior research and add texture and detail to the issues and solutions:

Quotes focused on identity, prejudice and violence:

“There’s not a ton of things that really represent you. I hear people, **even my family’s talking about they need to stop showing lesbian or gay characters** or stuff like that. And so people are fighting against your identity. I think is really hard as a person, for people to be fighting against your identity. So, I think, when it comes to like emotional support, like a little bit extra.”

“I also think that our identities would be taken seriously in an ideal world, there wouldn’t be people that seriously hate and want to harm people just because they are different than them and identify as something other than heterosexual. Definitely when it comes to like transgender people, **in an ideal world transgender people wouldn’t be getting killed all the time.**”

“It feels like [when] we’re part of the LGBT community, that’s your biggest label. **That’s not my only personality, that’s not me. That’s just a part of me.**”

“**I just want to see more like TV shows, movies, books, all of it, with like directors or just characters that are part of the LGBT community**”



Quotes focused on general supports for LGBTQI youth in and out of the prison system:

“A designated person that’s supposed to know the resources, any connections and things like that, for, for people that do identify [as LGBTQI]... the juvenile justice system could possibly like do the same thing. **Have a contact person in each county or, each like detention center or prison as like a safe space tool** to be able to tap into for things that maybe aren’t going so well.”

“There should be more like reports or like more data, readily available, and like cheap, and youth friendly, that really speaks about like the challenges that young people face. More hotlines for people who identify as [LGBTQI], and I know there is a hotline, but the public awareness isn’t fully there. Youth friendly therapy, where they’re able to text or something like that, it would be beneficial. **Having something specifically for the LGBT population where it’s like a hotline or texting where they’re able to bounce ideas off of somebody. Or if they don’t feel like they’re in a safe space, they need to be able to talk to somebody,** like I think that that would be like really beneficial.”

Quotes focused specifically on supporting LGBTQI youth in the prison abolition movement:

“They’re scared to, you know, openly support certain groups [such as LGBTQI] in fear that we won’t make as much progress. And so, **I think that some people just need to be more brave...** take the risks and we can still accomplish these things as well.”

“What I really like touched on being able to bring people around them that are comfortable in their own skin, right, but they’re able to **see that leadership, even reflected within our organization.** Providing the resources, having those intentional conversations, and giving them an opportunity to be able to let us know what they need from us.”

“I think that staff members need professional development, to be able to work with a certain population, respectfully, at any time. I just want to be careful like how we’re framing that because I feel like we’re putting [LGBTQI individuals] in a box. **I do think that everybody as a whole could benefit from the same thing whether they identify like that or not.**”

“Part of the reason why they’re so open and honest is because the community, like the family that they have is supportive. So if I’m thinking about something specific, for like that population, I would think more like community, knowledge, or like **breaking down the stigma is breaking down the stereotype, for that population, for parents [and] teachers...** shifting that mindset for those external folks so that everybody is treated equally. “

“In my state and, you know, my campaign... being open and out and honest is not frowned upon. We did a survey on topics that we would like to be able to learn more about. And part of that was having more outreach, like presentations, and resources available. Because a lot of our young people did identify as bisexual, pansexual, or gay. So part of it was like setting the stage for everybody and so everybody had the same foundational knowledge. So we had somebody come in and partner with our young people who did identify [as LGBTQI, and ask], “So what do you want your peers to let you know.” So we went through definitions, then we went through, you know, certain challenges. **We went through, kind of like what’s the difference [between] the resources that are specifically targeted to the populations and how there is a lack of resources in our state, or people who are questioning their identity or coming out. So, we had a whole thing around that, which was really good. Youth First actually had a staff member who came and put on one of those trainings for us who did identify as bisexual or lesbian. So that was really good, and I really appreciated that from Youth First.** They were the ones that came in with the foundational training able to tap into other places in our community--like we got familiar with the LGBT Center in Newark. We had them come in and do a presentation..”

While we cannot generalize from these interviews, we felt that it was important to include youths’ own words and perspectives serves as testimonials to the lived experiences that drive the basis of this report. These young people were willing to share to help us look for ideas to better support LGBTQI youth and we honor their commitment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The reports stated herein and LGBTQI youth in the movement quoted, confirm that LGBTQI youth experience direct threats to their identity, mental wellness, and physical safety. These attacks mirror broader society and contribute to a disproportionate number of negative outcomes for LGBTQI young people involved in the youth justice system. LGBTQI individuals are in the forefront of many social movements, and it is worth exploring the possible direct links between LGBTQI identities and the qualities that make for effective leaders in the movements to close youth prisons, and many other important issues. These recommendations reflect the need to support young leaders in the movement as we also work to prevent youth from entering the system in the first place.

Protect and Support LGBTQI Youth Leaders in Justice Movements:

Campaigns, groups, and nonprofits leading the work for abolition must protect LGBTQI youth in the youth justice system. By educating themselves about the legal protections that exist for LGBTQI youth in youth prisons, campaign leaders can include demands in the overall work towards abolition. Beyond that, from the quotes in our conversations, and from previous research, we know that practices such as affirming youth identities, recognizing LGBTQI leaders, and creating systemic approaches to real-time and personally connected support networks will make a difference to these young activists.

It is imperative that campaign partners recognize and acknowledge that experiences at home, in placement, in school, in the community, and in the juvenile justice system may have been traumatic, and that LGBTQ youth may need support, intervention, or treatment for trauma. Partners should connect with local and state groups that already support LGBTQI youth.

Advocate for the Unique Needs of LGBTQI Youth in the Youth Justice System:

Research shows us that LGBTQI youth have unmet needs before and after involvement in the youth justice system. Those in partnership with LGBTQI youth leaders in the youth justice movement must educate policymakers as to what it takes to build an inclusive continuum of care.

To understand some of these needs, Youth First Initiative conducted visioning sessions to elicit the types of supports that are important to youth²⁰. These recommendations, if met, fill space where there are clear identified needs and disproportionate negative impacts on LGBTQI youth, and include (but are not limited to):

- *Investing in mental health supports, school counselors, trauma-based clinics, and health insurance for everyone, while focusing on specific health needs of LGBTQI youth.*
- *Invest in a variety of educational opportunities that include post-secondary education, trades, and other programs tailored to the career interests of youth in communities and those currently incarcerated.*
- *Investing in meeting the basic needs of youth experiencing family rejection due to their identities, including food, housing, and transportation needs.*
- *Identifying and advocating for inclusive alternatives to incarceration programs.*



The Young Women’s Freedom Center, located in San Francisco was founded in 1993 to empower and inspire cis and trans young women, trans young men, and gender-expansive young people who have been disproportionately impacted by incarceration, racist and sexist policies, the juvenile and criminal justice systems, and/or the underground street economy, to create positive change in their lives and communities. YWFC meets people where they are at: on the streets, in jails and detention centers, and in the neighborhoods and communities where we/ they live. We create economic and leadership opportunities through internships, employment, and engagement in advocacy and organizing. Together, we build our personal and collective power, heal from trauma, advocate on behalf of ourselves and each other, and gain access to education and work to transform the conditions, systems, and policies that lead to intergenerational cycles of violence, incarceration, and poverty.

Recommendations for future study:

- *Preparing for careful recruitment of LGBTQI youth given what is known about risks for these youth in disclosing personal identities,*
- *Employing intersectional frameworks that allow space for complex experiences, and*
- *Carefully attending to the multiple narratives that may emerge regarding how and why LGBTQI youth are stepping into roles as powerful leaders.*

In conclusion, there is further opportunity within the youth prison abolition movement to study the contributions and strengths LGBTQI youth bring to the movement as a whole, as well as to detail the full extent of their experiences with the youth justice system.



Girls for Gender Equity (GGE)
Located in Brooklyn, New York, GGE works intergenerationally, through a Black feminist lens, to achieve gender and racial justice by centering the leadership of Black girls and gender-expansive young people of color to reshape culture and policy through advocacy, youth-led programming, and shifting dominant narratives.

Acknowledgements

The Youth First Initiative is a national campaign to end youth incarceration and invest in community-based supports, services and opportunities for youth. Youth First seeks to achieve a tipping point in ending youth incarceration and shifting resources towards investments in youth in their communities. The initiative is fiscally sponsored by the New Venture Fund, a 501 c 3 charity.

nokidsinprison.org

The Research Hub for Youth Organizing supports young people's capacity to claim power and create more just communities through field-driven research. The hub seeks to advance youth participation and leadership by co-creating and sharing research and curriculum with youth organizers, teachers, education leaders and policymakers. Founded in 2016 with support from the Ford Foundation, the hub is housed in the University of Colorado Boulder's School of Education and comprised of staff, faculty, researchers and graduate students affiliated with CU Engage and the National Education Policy Center (NEPC).

colorado.edu/education-research-hub/

The Youth First Initiative would like to thank our Peer Reviewer for their expertise: Danielle (Danny) King, Senior Youth Policy Counsel National Center for Lesbian Rights.

NCLRights.org

Endnotes

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