



Safe Impact

A look at the landscape of support for LGBTQ youth in Greater Grand Rapids.



WOMEN
BOY
ARE
BATTLE



A Look at the Numbers

Nationally

The issue of homelessness among LGBTQ youth is one that can't be denied and must not be ignored. In 2010, the National Alliance to End Homelessness published a conservative estimate that 300,000 LGBTQ youth experienced at least one night of homelessness as the direct result of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. The National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce notes that LGBTQ youth comprise up to 40% of all Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY). This number is largely disproportionate—LGBTQ youth make up only 10% of all youth in the US.

Research also shows that LGBTQ youth—whether homeless or not—face a variety of struggles that make day-to-day life challenging and even dangerous:

3X

LGBTQ youth are three times more likely to attempt suicide as their non-LGBTQ peers (The Trevor Project)

58%

58% of LGBTQ homeless youth have been sexually victimized (National Coalition for the Homeless)

30%

Nearly 30% of LGBTQ students report missing classes or days of school because of feeling unsafe in their school environment (GLSEN School Climate Survey 2011)

42%

42% of LGBTQ youth nationally report living in communities that are not accepting of LGBTQ people (Human Rights Campaign, "Growing up LGBT in America" 2012)



A Look at the Numbers

Locally

LGBTQ youth in the Greater Grand Rapids area are far from immune to these issues. Although local data sets are limited, some community agencies are collecting data. There are regional issues that not only contribute to the local data gap, but also increase the need for services and programs in our area.

These include cultural and/or faith norms that promote “don’t ask-don’t tell mentality”, a lack of training for service providers to ask questions in a culturally appropriate manner, youth’s reluctance to provide information relative to their sexual orientation/gender identity/gender expression because they are afraid they will be refused services, and limited services specific to LGBTQ youth. Emerging local data shows:

- 15-20% of local runaway and homeless youth identify as LGBTQ
- A lack of family acceptance is the largest contributing factor to local LGBTQ youth homelessness
- Youth 13-17 comprise the largest group of LGBTQ young people seeking services

Youth Voices

At the heart of these issues, of course, is not data, but the true stories of real youth in our community. We collected their stories and heard their struggles through a series of conversations with young people (up to age 24) who identify within the LGBTQ community.

The ethnographic research from the youth perspective paints a picture of uncertainty and fear. Youth don't know where to turn for help. When they find someone who might help, they are still hesitant to be completely honest about who they are and what they need. As a result, they experience more mistrust and fear when they should be feeling less—as they are seeking help.

I've never felt like a girl. And, growing up, nobody could understand why I dressed like I did—why I acted the way I did—none of it. And then people act surprised when I tell them I want to start transitioning.

—
19-year-old trans male, living in Grand Rapids

People tell me the only reason I'm the way that I am is because I was abused as a kid. But that's not why. I've always known who I am. I just couldn't talk about it.

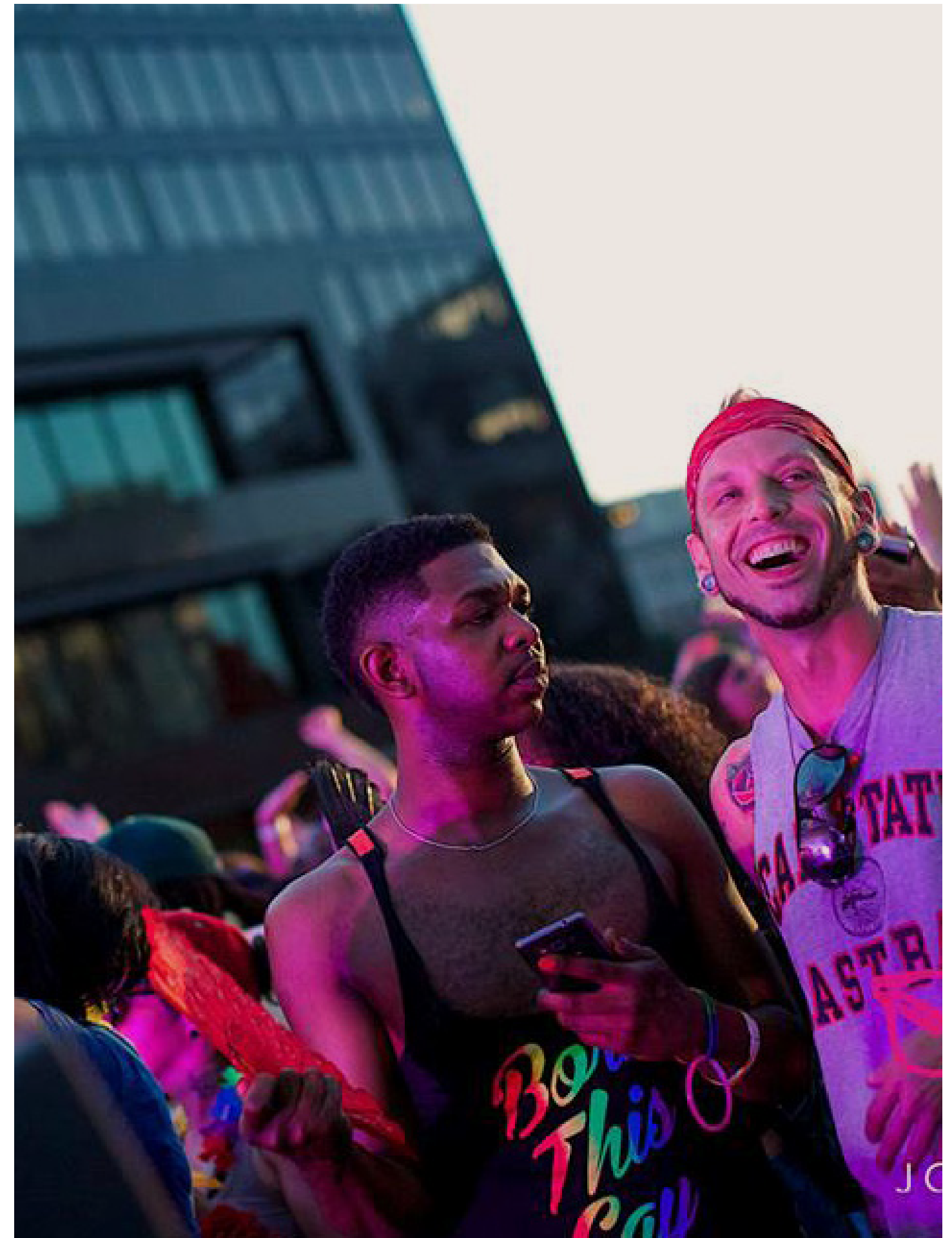
—
20-year-old female from Kentwood

I think about suicide all the time. And, I've tried it before. And I failed at even that. What's the point in living if nobody wants you around. For awhile my girlfriend's family wanted me. But now, I'm just another mouth that needs feedin'—I'm just in the way.

—
17-year-old female from Grand Rapids

There's no real place to feel safe—other than The Pride Center and here (Arbor Circle). There's no housing, no doctor, no nothing if you gay. And that's the real truth out here.

—
22-year-old female from Grand Rapids



Community Voices

To better understand the experiences of LGBTQ youth in our community, we must also understand those who influence and interact with them: their parents, family members, service providers, and leaders of the faith and education communities. Using qualitative measures, we collected perspectives from a sampling of such community members.

Their perspectives highlight the broad lack of understanding, services, and support for LGBTQ individuals and family members seeking help. And the lack of options only perpetuates what LGBTQ individuals already feel: that no one understands their situation and struggles enough to truly help them.

I mean, he's my son. And of course I love him. But, who am I going to talk to about this? My church? No way. My friends? Not a chance. So I tell him I love him and to act like he still likes girls when we are outside of our home. It's the only way I can keep him safe.

Parent of a gay teenager from Grand Rapids

I mean, we don't ask those questions-not really. We ask about gender like male and female. We don't ask if someone is a lesbian or gay. I guess we could-but it hasn't seemed important yet. And, we have never had any training on that either.

Non-profit social service provider from Grand Rapids

I don't really know how to explain to you what we have going on in our building. We are just a really diverse group. And students see a diverse group of educators and administrators who are like them-in all types of ways. Some of our most popular kids are youth who are out about being LGBT. And that's cool. We support them as a staff. We don't have some of the bullying issues that other districts have. And, as a team, we are real with our students. I think that makes all the difference.

Vice Principal of a local junior high



Key Themes

As we conducted interviews and focus groups, a striking—and encouraging—theme emerged:

Community stakeholders desire an outlet for conversation and problem solving around the needs of LGBTQ youth. Some of the other key themes we heard are outlined below.

Fear Culture

- Parents are scared. Parents of LGBTQ youth are often left feeling they are without resources or support. Fear of criticism from family, friends, and faith communities often leave **parents feeling isolated**. Many of the suburban communities surrounding Grand Rapids lack support resources for parents of LGBTQ youth.
- The dangers for street-dwelling youth are real. Many youth who are rejected or kicked out by their parents or other caregivers end up living on the street. The National Runaway **Switchboard finds that within 48 hours of being on the street, one out of three youth will be approached by a human trafficker**. Once homeless, LGBTQ homeless youth experience higher rates of physical and sexual assault and higher incidences of unsafe sexual behaviors than non-LGBTQ homeless youth. Indeed, many youth who were interviewed for this project report that sexual exploitation for LGBTQ young people is very real in the Greater Grand Rapids area.

Resource Scarcity

- While West Michigan remains a large philanthropic community, there are **few funding streams** to support LGBTQ youth—and even fewer to support LGBTQ runaway and homeless youth.
- There is little accountability within current funding structures to ensure that social service providers are providing non-discriminatory and culturally competent services to LGBTQ individuals.

Key Themes

Accessibility

- To ensure that LGBTQ youth are receiving effective physical and emotional care, the medical and behavioral health community needs **additional training and support**. For transgender individuals, barriers such as accessibility and coverage for care greatly impact the person's ability to complete their transition process.
- Many LGBTQ youth said there are few providers they fully trust to care for them. As a result, the lack of cultural competence and the **fear of disclosure** keep young people and their families from pursuing the limited resources and support currently available.

Data & Strategy

- Documenting the prevalence of LGBTQ youth homelessness is a considerable challenge. The very issues that make gathering data difficult also make addressing the problems more imperative.
- Young people are fearful that if they openly disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to service providers it could prevent them from getting the services they need. Unless additional efforts are placed on increasing social service cultural competency and increasing resources for LGBTQ youth, LGBTQ youth will likely continue to protect their identity in an effort to access resources.
- There is **no coordinated strategy or community plan** to promote inclusivity specific to young people in the LGBTQ community. Without a coordinated approach, organizations and agencies are left to learn and research best practices on their own. As one provider noted, “I am open to learning to do this differently, I just lack the time or capacity to check this out. So, it just goes onto a list of things for a different day.”

Opportunity

- LGBTQ young people are eager to find support and community within the Greater Grand Rapids area. Nearly every youth interviewed talked about hopefulness for their community to become more inclusive and be a place where they could continue to live and contribute.



What's Next?

A key finding from this study shows that Grand Rapids and the surrounding community is fragmented around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. While there are pockets of energy there are also pockets of ignorance that continue to exist perpetuating a lack of consistent competency and support for LGBTQ youth. A **coordinated strategy is needed** for our community to address the needs of our LGBTQ youth including:

- Housing
- Affirming employment
- Safe spaces
- Trained medical staff
- Support for parents and care givers
- Equity and respect within systems

It is also clear from the research that Grand Rapids lacks best practice strategies to promote and support change that is necessary for our community. Arbor Circle believes the **time is right for us to learn from other communities** who have progressed in this work and have already made change. They offer a learning platform for our community's growth that include:

- Coordinated prevention-based services for LGBTQ young people so no youth has to experience homelessness due to sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Funding and accountability structures that serve as a tipping point to promote learning, adherence to welcoming and non-discriminatory practices across the service continuum.

Arbor Circle is deeply committed to this work, not only as an ally, but as a safety net for youth who are experiencing homelessness due to family rejection. Effectively addressing, and ultimately resolving these issues will take a lot of coordinated work from a variety of community perspectives—more than Arbor Circle can impact.

Arbor Circle needs engaged community partners—both financial and programmatic—to join us in collaborative learning and strategy development to affect change so our LGBTQ youth can thrive in our community.

About Arbor Circle

Mission

Arbor Circle's mission is to transform the lives of children, adults, and families facing mental health, substance use, and family concerns in a caring partnership with our clients and a diverse community.

Vision

Arbor Circle's vision is to become the leader in providing innovative and proven approaches that help individuals and families experience hope and healing.

Main Campus

1115 Ball Avenue NE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505
616.456.6571
arborcircle.org

Contact

Julie Clossen
Arbor Circle
jcnossen@arborcircle.org
616.451.3001

Special Thanks

Carol Sarosik and Shelley Padnos
The Grand Rapids Community Foundation and Our LGBT Fund
The Grand Rapids Pride Center
The Safe Impact Human Centered Design Team
Arbor Circle's LGBTQ Community Group
The staff and youth at The Bridge of Arbor Circle
Dottie Rhodes
Gwen O'Brien
Terry Johnston



