

Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth: Analysis of LGBTQ+ Youth Social Organizations Across the U.S.

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Abstract

Existing research suggests that LGBTQ+ identifying youth are at a substantially higher risk of experiencing bullying, harassment, and rejection than their straight peers, both within the school setting and at home. This frequent mistreatment has been shown to result in mental health disturbances, including but not limited to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and self-harm behaviors. Research has also shown that one of the most essential factors in combatting the negative effects of such victimization is the presence of an accepting peer support system. As a way of forming and cultivating such peer support systems among LGBTQ+ youth, non-profit social organizations have formed to offer resources and community to this marginalized population. This paper aims to shed light on the substantial variation in operation, services offered, and social and cultural context of LGBTQ+ youth-oriented organizations across the U.S. by way of a content analysis of the websites of these LGBTQ+ youth-oriented organizations. Including over 120 organizations from 48 states, data was collected on services and programs provided, annual budget and expenses, and partnerships with other organizations. Analysis revealed a large amount of variation in the services provided by LGBTQ+ youth organizations. Several organizations offer free health services to LGBTQ+ youth, including mental health counselling and HIV/STI testing and prevention workshops. Many organizations also provide legal assistance, with 7 of the organizations analyzed identifying their primary focus as providing shelter and legal services for homeless LGBTQ+ youth. The findings of this study highlight the practices of organizations that cater to one of the most overlooked groups in the LGBTQ+ community. It is hoped that these findings can be used to inform similar organizations on how to better provide for LGBTQ+ youth in the future.

1. Introduction

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or as another label that falls under the category of gender or sexual minority (LGBTQ+) often face difficulties as a result of their marginalized status, both within the school environment and at home. Historically, this group has not received the attention and care that it needs within the LGBTQ+ community, with the majority of support and services that are offered by LGBTQ+ organizations and community centers being geared toward LGBTQ+ adults. However, this inequality has reduced somewhat over time due to an increase in community-wide awareness of the needs of LGBTQ+ youth, and today there are multiple social organizations and programs across the U.S. that provide support specifically to LGBTQ+ youth. However, as of yet, there has been little research devoted to assessing these unique organizations. This exploratory study aims to contribute to this untapped area of research by collecting data on where these organizations are located and how they operate.

Focusing on these essential organizations was not the goal of this project initially. Originally conceptualized as an assessment of online communities centered around LGBTQ+ youth, this study later shifted focus to address the dearth of research surrounding these social support-oriented organizations and the additional services they offer to LGBTQ+

youth. However, in order to maintain the original focus centering on the increasingly prevalent role of online communities in the lives of today's youth (especially true for LGBTQ+ youth, who often turn to online communities to find support and like-minded peers), organizations were assessed based on the information provided on their websites.

The following sections will discuss 1.) a literature review establishing the risks faced by LGBTQ+ youth and the need for the social organizations described in this study, 2.) the methodology and research design used in this assessment of LGBTQ+ youth social organizations, 3.) the results of the data collected from multiple organizations across the U.S., including the kinds of additional resources and services offered by these organizations, and finally, 4.) potential options for future research, including both additional analysis of the data collected in this study as well as future application of the methods used in this assessment for additional data sets.

2. Literature Review

Multiple studies have shown that LGBTQ+ youth are at an increased risk of being bullied and victimized^{1,2}. This victimization can result in a number of emotional and behavioral problems, as well as general feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Transgender youth are even more vulnerable to bullying and harassment, and therefore more prone to these negative emotional and behavioral effects³.

A 2014 study performed by Beckerman & Auerbach suggests that LGBTQ+ youth are more prone to developing symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of their heightened vulnerability to peer victimization, in instances of both physical and verbal bullying and harassment. In the study, 91.3% of respondents reported having been verbally bullied, while 78.3% reported having experienced some form of physical bullying. The study also considered the frequency of bullying, finding that respondents who reported more frequent victimization were more likely to show symptoms of PTSD (50% reported frequent verbal bullying, while 70% reported frequent physical bullying)⁴.

In addition, LGBTQ+ youth also report higher rates of other mental and emotional problems as well as substance abuse. Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig demonstrated, with a study involving 97 LGBTQ+ youth, that LGBTQ+ youth more frequently experience symptoms of depression than their straight and cisgender peers. This was discussed in the context of other contributing and negating factors, such as frequency of bullying, experience of sexual harassment, and the importance of support systems⁵.

Newcomb, Heinz, & Mustanski examined vulnerability to alcohol abuse in LGBTQ+ youth, factoring in how both victimization and support influence this vulnerability over time. Interestingly, the study revealed stark differences between male and female LGBTQ+ youth (with no mention made of youth with non-binary gender identities). Males reported higher rates of alcohol consumption that increased over time, while females, although reporting over-all lower averages of alcohol consumption and abuse, were shown to be more strongly impacted by victimization and psychological distress, with these factors correlated to increased alcohol use⁶.

In addition to experiencing elevated rates of mental illness as a result of victimization, LGBTQ+ youth also experience higher rates of homelessness compared to straight and cisgender youth. In 2012, Durso & Gates conducted a survey of service providers who work with homeless youth, with services range from emergency shelters to independent housing programs. Survey data showed that 94% of service providers reported having worked with LGBTQ+ youth at some point in the past, an increase from the 82% reported in a similar survey conducted ten years prior. Durso & Gates also found that LGBTQ+ youth make up a disproportionate 40% of the homeless youth population, attributing this to the high number of LGBTQ+ youth who are rejected by their families upon coming out⁷.

While there seems to be no shortage of research establishing the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth, there has also been substantial research on how to combat and prevent these negative outcomes. One of the strongest factors identified in preventing these negative experiences and promoting wellbeing for LGBTQ+ youth is the presence of an accepting peer support system. Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, & Ryan examine this social phenomenon, referring to it as "sexuality-related social support", meaning acceptance and support specifically and explicitly regarding sexual identity and behavior⁸. Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo performed a study that included 425 lesbian, gay, and bisexual-identifying youth (potential subjects who reported identifying as transgender were removed from participation, leaving this demographic unexplored). They found that while 94% of respondents reported having experienced some form of victimization (much like Beckman & Auerbach's similar rates mentioned above), peer support was the most effective combatant of psychological distress resulting from victimization⁹.

Groups created for the specific purpose of fostering connections between LGBTQ+ youth have shown to be extremely effective at improving the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth, be these school-based gay-straight alliances

(GSAs) or other NPOs^{10,11}. In fact, research conducted in 2015 by Roe reported not only the importance of peer support for LGBTQ+ youth, including that achieved through participation in formal organizations, but also that the presence of a GSA or similar support group at school had a positive effect on the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth, whether they individually participated in the organization or not¹². This points to a latent and more cultural effect of LGBTQ+ youth organizations, that being the importance of promoting a broader sense of cultural acceptance for LGBTQ+ youth¹³.

As mentioned, transgender youth are disproportionately susceptible to victimization and bullying, making support systems even more necessary¹⁴. It is also important to note that peer organizations (and by extension the research involving them) that are designed around lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth specifically may not be as effective or validating for transgender youth. This establishes the need for additional support groups geared toward the specific needs of trans youth¹⁵. The unique needs of this marginalized group within an already marginalized group will be taken into consideration when assessing LGBTQ+ youth social organizations and how they meet (or fail to meet) these needs.

3. Methods

This study consists of a content analysis of the websites of youth-focused LGBTQ+ social organizations across the U.S., examining both the frequency and structure of social support services offered, as well as any other services offered by the organization. Following the shift in focus to non-profit social organizations, this method was chosen for two reasons; first, it is a highly efficient way to collect data on multiple organizations across the country. Second, and perhaps more importantly, this process closely mimics the way LGBTQ+ youth would go about finding support in their area. In this way, we can ensure that the organizations included and the information they provide are as close as possible to the information LGBTQ+ youth would have access to.

The first step in this study was to identify organizations that qualified for further analysis. This consisted of multiple internet searches using a variety of terms in various combinations (i.e. “LGBT, LGBTQ, queer”, “youth, student, teen” “support group, organization, group” etc.). This process was repeated by state or, when applicable, by city or county (for example, using these terms in combination with “California” produced limited results, but “San Francisco, Orange County, etc.” provided results).

In addition to this initial identification, organizations were also held to three criteria for inclusion in the study. First, the organization must be active, meaning there must be evidence of some activity (for example, blog posts, scheduled event, or mentions in the media) within the past year. Similarly, the organization was required to have an active website; any organizations that were active yet had expired or deleted websites were not included. Second, the organization must be local in nature, meaning larger, nationwide organizations such as the Trevor Project or the True Colors Fund were not included, as these organizations have been the focus of more research than have locally-based organizations.

The final criterion changed slightly over the process of data collection. Originally, the final requirement was that the organization had to be solely and explicitly youth-focused. However, this quickly revealed significant regional gaps that, upon further inspection, were being filled by youth-focused programs that operated out of a larger LGBTQ+ organization or community center. Due to the similar structure and function of these support groups, the criteria for inclusion was expanded to include both youth-focused organizations and youth programs offered by larger LGBTQ+ organizations. In total, 121 organizations representing 48 states and the District of Columbia were identified for further analysis. 5 of the 121 were later dropped due to either not meeting the criteria upon further inspection, or due to the website being deleted between the time they were identified and when data collection began, bringing the total number of organizations down to 116.

The website of each organization was then thoroughly examined, with data collected pertaining to the following categories. First, mission statements were collected from each organization for later analysis of the specific language and terminology used in the mission statements as well as the stated goals of the individual organizations. A clearly labeled mission statement or similar substitute was obtained for each organization, with some caveats. In some cases where the “organization” was rather a subsidiary youth program of a larger LGBTQ+ organization, a specific mission statement for the youth program was not present. Instead, only a mission statement pertaining to the entire organization was provided. These statements may or may not mention youth explicitly, so in addition to collecting these broader mission statements, summaries or descriptions given by the youth program (not labeled specifically as a “mission statement”) were collected in addition to the mission statement provided by the larger organization when applicable.

Data was also collected on the number of support groups offered by the organization as well as the time, frequency, and structure of these groups. Support groups may be tailored to a specific demographic of the LGBTQ+ youth

population (in many cases trans youth, as will be discussed below), or they may be more general in nature. Structurally, organizations may provide formal meetings with scheduled activities, or the organization may offer more informal drop-in hours, with no scheduled activities or agenda.

When applicable, financial and structural information was also collected for each organization. This includes financial documents such as annual reports or tax forms, when provided, as well as the total number of board members and staff employed by the organization. Additionally, data was collected on any partnerships the organization had established with other organizations. Most commonly, this took the form of partnerships with local LGBTQ+ centers, but could also include other types of organizations, including other LGBTQ+ youth-focused organizations, health or legal service providers, or faith-based collectives.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly to this study, data was also collected on a number of additional services offered by these organizations beyond only peer-based social support groups. These additional services can range from HIV/STI testing and counselling to tutoring and homework help. The primary categories of additional services offered were identified as health-related services, legal services, education/training services, grants and scholarships, and mentor/leadership programs.

4. Findings

This study was intended to provide a surface level overview of the location and operation of LGBTQ+ youth social organizations nationwide. As such, the level of detail obtained is rather limited, offering only basic information on the number, size, location, and groups and services offered by each organization, and more importantly, how accessible that information is to LGBTQ+ youth. However, as discussed above, the method and focus of this study, while superficial, allows for analysis of multiple organizations across the U.S., providing a description of the overall landscape of LGBTQ+ social organizations. Keeping this broad focus in mind, examination of the data collected from this assessment yielded potentially valuable information regarding the functioning of these organizations.

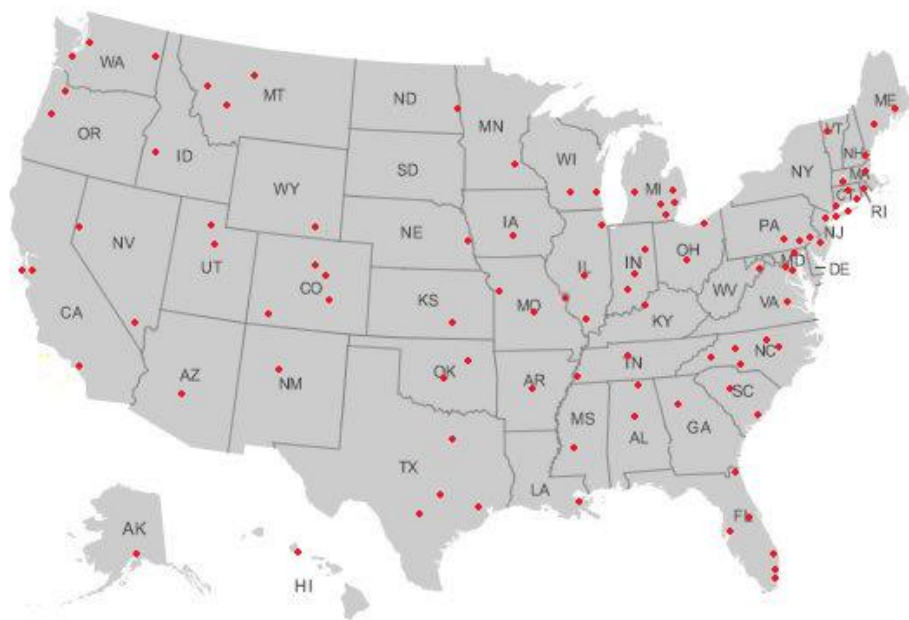


Figure 1: Locations of LGBTQ+ social organizations across the U.S.

The first point of interest can be seen in the geographical distribution of the organizations in the sample. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the locations of the 116 organizations selected for analysis, with each dot representing at least one organization. These the majority of these organizations are based in or near large cities, with some cities or counties being home to multiple, separate organizations (for example, 4 separate organizations included in the sample are based in New York City). In such cases, while the individual organizations operate independently of

each other, they often describe working with one another and provide links to each other on their websites (as was the case for The Orlando Youth Alliance and Zebra Coalition, both based out of Orlando, Florida). While this concentration of organizations around large metropolitan areas makes sense in terms of needs and resources, it also raises questions about the role of LGBTQ+ youth social organizations in rural areas.

The mission statements collected from each organization varied greatly in length, from single, concise sentences to multiple paragraphs that covered the history of the organization. Despite this variance, all of the mission statements contained similar overall themes of welcoming and acceptance to LGBTQ+ youth. Similar to the variation found in mission statement content, there was also much variation in the terminology used to describe LGBTQ+ youth. 95.69% of all organization used some variation of the LGBTQ+ acronym, including LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA, and LGBTQQIAP+. Three organizations that utilized the acronym also used terms like SSA (same-sex attracted), SGL (same gender loving), and SGM (sexual and gender minority) along with the acronym. The 4.31% of organizations that did not use a form of the LGBTQ+ acronym instead used terms like SGM/GSM or queer and trans.

A small number of the organizations in the sample named an additional specialized focus alongside the general focus of supporting LGBTQ+ youth. 3 organizations (2.59%) described themselves as organizations specifically by and for LGBTQ+ youth of color. These organizations focus on supporting LGBTQ+ youth who experience both homophobia/transphobia and racism, and the unique challenges they face both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community. Similarly, 8 organizations (6.90%) cited their primary focus as combatting homelessness among LGBTQ+ youth, offering temporary housing, legal assistance, and help finding employment. As mentioned, LGBTQ+ youth experience higher rates of homelessness than do their straight and cisgender peers, so these organizations, though relatively uncommon, provide a much-needed service to homeless LGBTQ+ youth.

There was also much variation found in the age of the organizations studied. 83 organizations (71.55%) provided the year that the organization was founded. Of those 83, 29 (34.94%) are relatively young, having been formed in 2000 or later. However, the remaining 65.06% have all been in operation since the 1990s, with the oldest, Iowa's Ozone House, approaching its 50th anniversary next year.

4.1. Organization Type

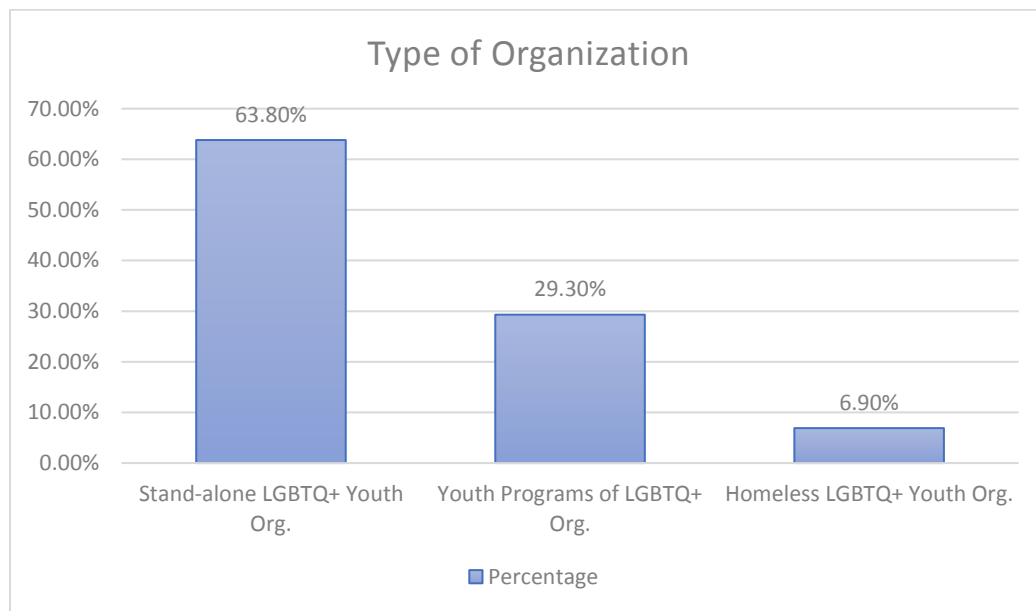


Figure 2: Distribution of organization type

Figure 2 displays the classification of organizations into three types. Most commonly found are stand-alone, youth-focused organizations that operate separately from other LGBTQ+ organizations, accounting for 63.80% of the sample. The second largest category of organizations is comprised of youth programs offered by larger LGBTQ+ organizations, usually community centers, making up 29.30% of the organizations in this study. These are the organizations that would not have been included under the original criteria.

The final category identified contains the organizations specifically oriented toward addressing and combatting the problem of homelessness among LGBTQ+ youth, as discussed above, accounting for 6.90% of the sample. While these organizations could be considered stand-alone youth organizations, their unique focus sets them apart. While social support is an aspect of these organizations, their main focus is providing legal assistance, emergency shelter, and transitional housing to homeless LGBTQ+ youth. These focal differences provide enough reason to separate these organizations out into their own category. It should be noted, however, that while these organizations may partner with local LGBTQ+ organizations or community centers, none of the 8 organizations in this category operate as a program of a larger organization.

4.2. Meeting Style

68.70% of all organizations in the study reported formal, regularly scheduled meetings. The frequency of these meetings ranged from a single monthly group to multiple groups meeting several times a week. 38.76% of organization reported drop-in hours, again with varying frequency, ranging from bi-monthly drop-in days to a 24-hour drop-in center. However, it is important to note that there is substantial overlap between organizations that host regular meetings and those that provide drop in hours, as 25.86% of organizations reported providing both options. Figure 3 displays this overlap, as well as the 18.42% of organizations that do not offer regularly scheduled meetings or drop-in hours.

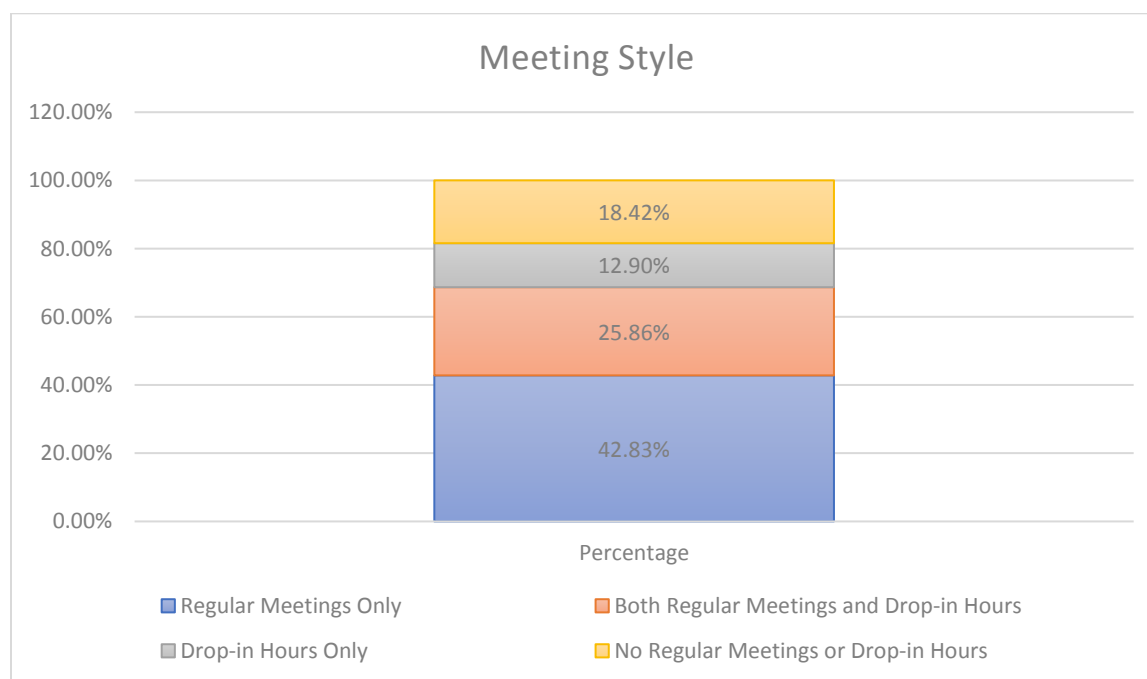


Figure 3: The style of support meetings offered by LGBTQ+ youth social organizations

In addition, 71.74% of the organizations that hold some form of regular meeting also offered additional support groups. These secondary groups typically meet less frequently than the general group and are intended for and tailored to subcategories within LGBTQ+. This includes men only and women only support groups, bisexual support groups, and support groups for youth of color. However, the most common type of secondary support group offered are trans support groups, offered by 39.13% of all organizations that hold regular meetings. As mentioned, trans youth face even higher rates of victimization than LGBQ youth in general, so these additional support groups offer much needed solace for trans youth, providing them with a space that is actively supportive and affirming of their gender identity.

4.3. Health Services

Services pertaining to health were the most frequently reported type of additional service offered, with 50.6% of all organizations providing some form of health-related service. Of these services, mental health counselling was the most commonly offered additional service, offered by 33.6% percent of the total 116 organizations. Counselling is provided through these organizations either via counsellors employed by the organization or through referrals to local counsellors who have partnered with the organization. Given the aforementioned prevalence of mental illness among LGBTQ+ youth resulting from harassment and victimization, it is not surprising that mental health counselling is the most frequently offered service.

The second most commonly offered health related service is HIV/STI testing services, with 24.1% of the 116 organizations offering this service in one form or another. Testing may be provided only on select clinic days, or the service may be available daily, depending on the organization's budget and resources. Some organizations that offer HIV/STI testing also provide HIV/STI-related treatment services, including medication like PrEP and PEP. Additionally, organizations offering HIV/STI testing services also provide safe-sex education and resources as a part of their HIV/STI prevention programs.

Once again, as with meeting structure, there is a substantial overlap between the organizations that offer mental health counselling services and those that offer HIV/STI testing, as 14.66% of organizations provide both services. Figure 4 displays this overlap, as well as the 7.76% of organizations that offer other miscellaneous health-related services.

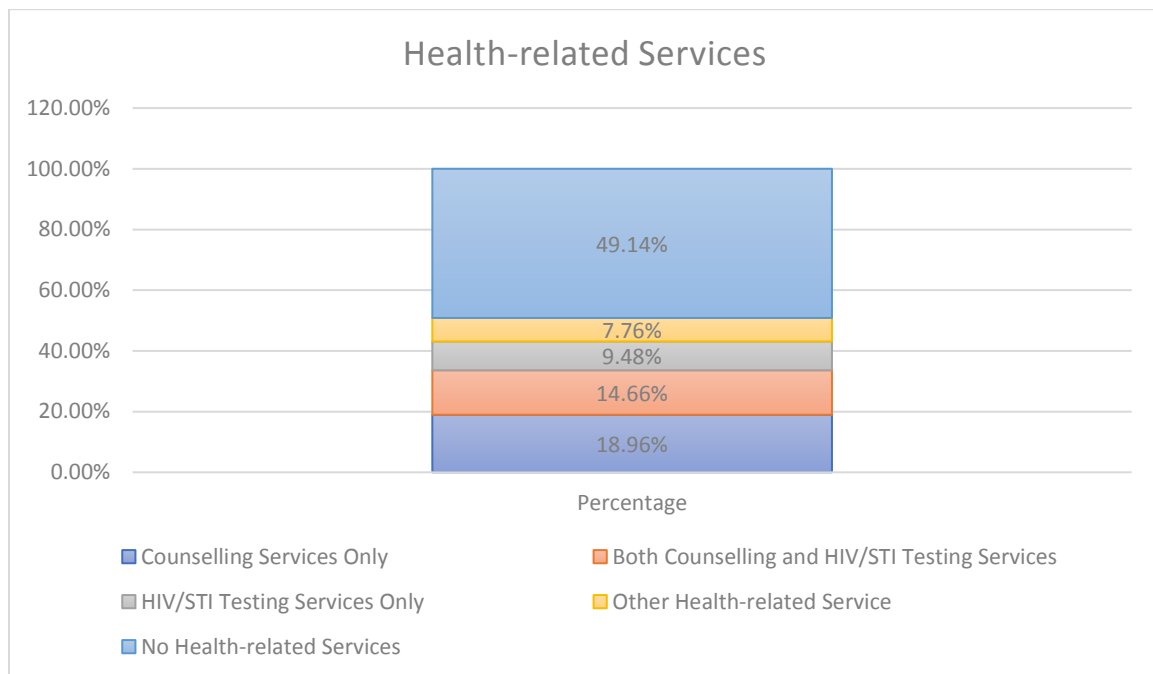


Figure 4: Additional health-related services offered by LGBTQ+ youth social organizations

4.4. Legal Services

Following health-related services as the most commonly reported additional service offered, the second most common type of additional service offered were legal services at 22.41%. These services usually involve case management services and assistance with temporary or transitional housing and employment. This includes both services provided by the 6.90% of organizations focused on reducing homelessness among LGBTQ+ youth as well as similar services

offered through other types of organizations. Additional legal services that may be offered include assistance with name changes and changing gender markers on legal documents, both of which are services primarily for trans youth.

5. Discussion

While social support is the primary goal for many of these organizations, it is far from the only service offered. The frequency of both health-related services and legal assistance reported as key services offered by LGBTQ+ social organizations points to the increased need for these kinds of services among LGBTQ+ youth. The health-related services provided by these organizations typically focus on sexual health, including both the HIV/STI testing previously discussed as well as safe-sex workshops and other educational outreach programs where free materials (including condoms, dental dams, etc.), are provided help to combat the dearth of sex education in public schools regarding non-heterosexual sex and prevent the spread of HIV and other STIs.

In addition to providing an essential service for LGBTQ+ youth in general, these services are even more necessary for trans youth who may face additional barriers to medical care and who may be closeted or unsupported by their parents, or unsure how to navigate the medical system as a trans person. Mental health counseling is also vital for LGBTQ+ youth, who, as mentioned above, experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and other forms of mental illness. While the mere presence of organizations like these in communities across the U.S. helps to sway the overall cultural opinion towards acceptance, mental health care professionals who partner with these organizations can help mitigate the damaging effects of social stigma and improve the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth today.

5.1. Limitations

Similar to the aforementioned limitation in terms of the level of detail obtainable via this method of research, there are two other limitations that arose during the analysis portion of this study that are worth mentioning, if for no other reason than their potential significance in future research. The first limitation is the lack of attention given to trans-focused youth social organizations. While some groups offered trans-focused support groups, none of the organizations advertise themselves as entirely trans-focused. Once again, this is not to say that these organizations do not exist, but this study was intended to look at organizations serving youth in the entire LGBTQ+ community. However, as was the case with the inclusion of youth programs based in LGBTQ+ community centers, trans-centric youth support groups may be meeting the needs of trans youth that are not being met by general LGBTQ+ youth social organizations. As will be discussed later, trans-focused youth organizations offer an excellent opportunity for a continuation of this research.

The second limitation of mention comes from the lack of financial information available from these organizations. Financial information was collected when made publicly available, however only 24.14% of organizations in this sample provided any kind of financial reports. Additionally, those that did make financial information available to the public were larger organizations, often connected to larger (non-youth focused) LGBTQ+ community centers, and therefore had annual budgets of \$1,000,000 or more. While no concrete statement can be made given the lack of similar information from the remainder of organizations, these high budgets are likely not reflective of the financial means of the sample as a whole. Organizations that did list their financial information also reported a larger staff than average for the sample, and were also more likely to offer additional services, including health and legal services, educational services, and also the occasional scholarship or grant program (9.48%).

6. Future Research

There are many opportunities for further research, including both a more in-depth analysis of information collected as a part of this data set as well as additional exploration of gaps or limitations made apparent by this initial observation. One topic that warrants further research is the variation in leadership structure that exists among these 116 organizations. In terms of paid employees, there was found to be a wide range in the number of staff members reported by each organization, ranging from 1 to 81 total staff members, and with 43.10% failing to provide this information at all, meaning either they have no permanent staff or simply do not wish to make this information public. In addition to this, 3 organizations (2.59%) advertise themselves as youth-led, with any adults acting as only chaperones rather than leaders. Apart from formally appointed or elected leadership, nearly all (93.97%) of the organizations in this

sample utilize volunteers, typically as supervisors for youth meetings. It is unknown what kind of training is required for adult volunteers or how this may vary from one organization to another.

Similar to the question of volunteer training, a number of the organizations researched offered additional educational services and community outreach programs. This includes both health-based programs like the safe-sex workshops mentioned above, as well as programs focusing on teaching LGBTQ+ youth leadership skills. Educational services were not included in the initial data collection, so accurate statistics on these types of programs are currently unavailable. However, this would be an interesting element to consider in future assessments.

As mentioned above, the focus on locally-based youth organizations excludes national organizations and programs. However, many local organizations researched utilized resources provided by national organizations (including The Trevor Project, GLSEN, PFLAG, and The GSA Network). Future research could potentially explore the partnerships between locally-based organizations and nationwide organizations, including all the additional resources they have to offer. In the case of GSA Network specifically, which provides resources and support to student-led clubs called GSAs (Genders & Sexualities Alliance, formerly Gay-Straight Alliance) in schools across the U.S., more research is required to explore if and how the organizations in this sample interact with local GSAs.

While some organizations studied offered trans-specific support groups in addition to general LGBTQ+ support groups, none of the organizations in the sample are explicitly and solely trans-focused. As previously discussed, this is part of the limitations of the research design, as the goal was to focus on general LGBTQ+ youth social organizations and the additional services they provide. However, similar organizations that focus solely on trans youth exist all across the U.S., and future research, potentially involving a similar collection method as the one used in this initial study, could reveal more about the location and function of trans youth-focused social organizations and how they differ from general LGBTQ+ youth social organizations.

As with the lack of trans-focused organizations, this initial study also revealed a lack of organizations based in rural areas. Unlike trans-focused organizations, this is not due to the parameters of this study, but rather due to a lack of information being made available. This is not to say that there are no LGBTQ+ youth social organizations in rural areas. The lack of representation in this sample may be due to several factors. Primarily, locating web-based information on rural organizations may require a more focused internet search than the one used in this nationwide overview. Further research may involve an increased focus on these harder to find rural organizations.

7. Conclusion

Although LGBTQ+ youth face increased risks, organizations like those researched in this study are stepping up to meet these challenges. While they provide LGBTQ+ youth across the nation with a supportive and affirming environment where they are free to be who they are, they also do so much more. They help LGBTQ+ youth access medical care, help them find housing and employment, and even prepare them with the skills to become community leaders and change their future. By simply being a visible presence in the community, these organizations even play a part in promoting acceptance on a societal level, potentially reducing the elevated risks faced by LGBTQ+ youth altogether.

Though this initial project has been completed, it only begins to scratch the surface of what can be learned from these vital organizations and others like them. What is known, however, is that there are more of these organizations forming each year, providing support to more LGBTQ+ youth and helping to make the world a safer place for them.

8. Endnotes

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