THE VISIBILITY GAP

Why LGBTQ+ young people may be missing from the monitoring data of mainstream homelessness services

Executive summary

WITH THANKS TO OUR YOUNG ADVISORS

This research was co-produced with six LGBTQ+ Young Advisors whose insight and challenge shaped every stage, from framing the questions to analysing findings and drafting recommendations. We thank them for ensuring the work remained grounded in lived experience and produced findings that are credible and relevant.

BACKGROUND AND AIMS

Youth homelessness remains a pressing social challenge in the UK, with more than 118,000 young people aged 16–24[1] experiencing homelessness in 2023/24. Evidence suggests that LGBTQ+ young people are significantly overrepresented within these numbers, making up an estimated 16-32% of those accessing homelessness services (Albert Kennedy Trust, 2021[2]; McCoy, 2018[3]; Porchlight, 2015[4]).

Depaul UK's monitoring data, however, tells a different story. In 2023/24, only around 8% of young people using its services were recorded as LGBTQ+, far below what national estimates would predict. Understanding why this gap exists is essential for ensuring that LGBTQ+ young people are able to access support, feel safe to share who they are, and are represented accurately in organisational data.

Supported by The George Michael Fund and managed by The Talent Fund, Depaul UK commissioned Sarah McCoy and Sarah Tayleur to explore what was behind the discrepancy expected and observed data. The research considered three possible scenarios:

1. **Under-representation:**
   LGBTQ+ young people are genuinely underrepresented within Depaul UK's services, suggesting barriers that prevent them from accessing either homelessness support in general or Depaul UK's services specifically.

2. **Non-disclosure:**
   LGBTQ+ young people are using Depaul UK's services but are not disclosing their identities to staff, possibly due to concerns about safety or potential discrimination.

3. **A visibility gap:**
   Young people disclose their identities to staff, but this information is not consistently recorded at a system level, pointing to issues with data processes and systems.

To explore the likely contribution of each of these explanations, the

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1   Centrepoint (2025). Hidden in plain sight: Understanding youth homelessness in the UK. Centrepoint. https://centrepoint.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/Centrepoint%20Databank%20Full%20Report%202023-2024.pdf

2   Albert Kennedy Trust. (2021). The LGBTQ+ youth homelessness report 2021. AKT & University of Kent. https://www.akt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/akt-thelgbtq2byouthhomelessnessreport2021.pdf

3   McCoy, S. (2018). Danger Zones and Stepping Stones: Phase Two: A quantitative exploration of young people's experience of temporary living. Depaul UK. https://www.depaul.org.uk/policies/research-danger-zones-part-two/

4   Porchlight. (2015). Out of the margins: A study into LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Kent. Porchlight.

research aimed to:

- Understand LGBTQ+ young people's experiences of homelessness services, including what shapes access, safety, trust and willingness to disclose.

- Identify why disclosures do or do not appear in organisational datasets, and what gets in the way of accurate, consistent recording.

Based on the insights generated, practical recommendations are provided to strengthen inclusion, improve practice, and generate more robust identity-related datasets.

Whilst all the young people involved in the research had engaged with Depaul UK services, their accounts often drew on a wider range of statutory and voluntary services. The findings therefore highlight sector-wide lessons, not service-specific ones.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection took place from June to August 2025. We involved:

- Nine young people self-identifying as LGBTQ+ who had used homelessness services between the ages of 18-25. We heard their stories through one-to-one interviews and one joint interview.

- 74 Depaul UK staff members through an online survey. This represented 30% of the charity's client-facing team.

- 18 Depaul UK staff members through focus groups and one-to-one interviews.[5]

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5   A subset of those who completed the survey.

FINDINGS

SCENARIO ONE: UNDER-REPRESENTATION

> **"I just literally didn't know about [homelessness services] until I was literally rough sleeping"**
>
> *- Catherine*

Our findings suggest that at least part of the gap between expected and recorded numbers of LGBTQ+ young people in services may be due to genuine underrepresentation. Young people described a range of barriers that can prevent them from approaching or engaging with homelessness support. Some are likely to affect all young people experiencing homelessness, but others were specific to LGBTQ+ young people and are therefore likely to contribute to their lower visibility within mainstream services.

The universal barriers highlighted included practical and structural challenges such as:

- limited awareness of what support is available and how to access it;

- confusing referral pathways and obstacles to eligibility; and

- digital exclusion or lack of devices.

> **"LGBTQ+ young people are at a higher risk of domestic violence, mental health crisis, and are scared of other people... personal safety impacts why people don't reach out, they are keeping themselves safe"**
>
> *- Young Advisor*

Alongside these, LGBTQ+ young people described additional fears and risks that deterred them from seeking formal help. Several said they had avoided services because of stigma, fear of discrimination, or previous negative experiences in other settings, including worries about being misgendered, judged, or placed somewhere unsafe. As a result, some relied on informal networks instead of approaching services, making them absent from organisational data altogether and, in some cases, exposing them to additional risk.

SCENARIO TWO: NON-DISCLOSURE

"It's unsafe to be anything other than cis[gender] at the moment."

- Levi

The accounts we heard from staff and young people indicate that some LGBTQ+ young people may be in services, but do not feel secure or supported enough to talk openly about their identities. Young people drew a clear distinction between accessing a service and feeling able to be themselves within it. Disclosure was strongly shaped by whether the environment felt inclusive, identity-affirming, and free from judgement.

Willingness to disclose was affected by:

- whether the environment signalled LGBTQ+ inclusion e.g. visual cues, clear policies;

- the extent to which staff were knowledgeable and understanding about issues affecting LGBTQ+ young people. Highlighted issues included: a lack of understanding about the need for correct, consistent pronoun use; confusion between sex assigned at birth and gender identity; limited awareness of gender-affirming care; and a lack of awareness and understanding about gender dysphoria; and

- cultural factors that made disclosure feel particularly risky.

"LGBTQ+ people have had to hide for so long... our identity, our true selves, to the point where now, why would I want to let someone in? Because that's just more time and more trauma and more therapy that I'm gonna have to go to"

- Jamie

Without the right conditions to make them feel safe, young people described staying quiet about their identities or disclosing only selectively. For some, concealing parts of themselves had become second nature, shaped by previous negative experiences and the need to manage risk.

Staff uncertainty also contributed to non-disclosure. Many workers told us they avoided or delayed asking identity-related questions because they feared causing offence, 'getting it wrong', or damaging trust. Timing was a particular concern: staff worried that raising identity too early could jeopardise rapport, but delaying it meant the moment was often missed entirely.

SCENARIO THREE: A VISIBILITY GAP

A third explanation for the data mismatch is that some LGBTQ+ young people do disclose their identities to staff, but this information is not consistently recorded in organisational systems. This creates a visibility gap: identities are visible within support relationships but invisible in the data. In practice this means services may be more inclusive than their monitoring suggests, but that providers cannot evidence who they are reaching or whether support is equitable.

Both staff and young people emphasised that collecting identity data matters for avoiding misgendering, tailoring support, ensuring safe placements, and building trust. However, staff tended to see this value at the individual level, rather than the organisational level, meaning transferring data onto systems could be deprioritised.

> **"Why are you asking me this? What's the purpose?"**
>
> *- Bethan*

We identified several factors that may contribute to the visibility gap:

- **Young people's discomfort with data storage:** Some young people were reluctant to have their data recorded on an accessible system, fearing misuse or data breaches.

- **Lack of clear organisational messaging:** These fears were compounded by a lack of clarity regarding purpose of data collection. Staff said this made their explanations 'woolly', reducing young people's willingness to have information recorded.

- **Concerns about protecting the support relationship:** Staff sometimes chose not to record disclosures to avoid disrupting rapport, to avoid labelling a young person, or because the timing of the disclosure made data entry feel inappropriate.

- **Gaps in staff understanding and confidence:** Some staff felt unsure how to categorise what had been shared, particularly when terminology was unfamiliar or evolving. More than one in five (22%) survey respondents reported feeling confused about what different terms mean. Staff noted that younger workers, and those in more regular contact with young people, as opposed to night or locum workers, tended to be more confident when it comes to having identity-related conversations and recording information on systems.

> **"But they also have no idea about trans or non-binary young people. And I actually ended up having to teach a lot of them stuff... my support worker came to me because she had a trans young person. So I would have to signpost her to [LGBTQ+ organisations] because she didn't have an idea."**
>
> *- Levi*

- **Assumptions influencing recording:** We found examples of staff inferring identity based on appearance or relationships. This undermined trust and could lead to inaccurate recording i.e. LGBTQ+ identities being missed.

- **Systems not designed for nuance:** Staff described rigid or overly broad fields and no way to record why data wasn't asked or entered. These issues made accurate recording difficult and made blank fields impossible to interpret.

- **Insufficient training:** Only 16% of surveyed staff said they had had recent LGBTQ+ awareness training. Staff wanted practical, data-focused, and regularly refreshed training grounded in real examples and lived experience.

> **"I think the biggest thing [for trans people] is... that they should have the reassurance that that person sees them the way they want to be seen."**
>
> *- Indigo*

Our analysis across the three scenarios suggests that the discrepancy between Depaul UK's monitoring data and national estimates of the proportion of LGBTQ+ young people experiencing homelessness is not caused by a single issue but by a combination of access barriers, safety and trust concerns, and weaknesses in data processes. LGBTQ+ young people may be missing from services, present but not disclosing, or disclosing but not having their information recorded. Addressing this to ensure LGBTQ+ young people are visible in the data requires action across environments, relationships, and systems.

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Across all three scenarios, young people were clear that the foundation of safety, trust, and inclusion lies in the environment itself - shaping whether they access services, disclose their identities, and feel confident to have that information recorded. Our findings point to four key areas of focus for homelessness services:

- **Respectful and supportive staff** were considered the cornerstone of trust and belonging. Using correct pronouns, avoiding assumptions, and enabling young people to express their identities freely had a strong positive impact, whilst misgendering or intrusive questions often caused distress and withdrawal.

- **Diversity within staff teams** made a measurable difference. Seeing LGBTQ+ staff, or those with other shared lived experiences, built trust and signalled genuine inclusion. However, young people were clear that representation alone is not enough; inclusion must be embedded across teams, not reduced to tokenism.

- **Visible signs of inclusion**, such as Pride flags, posters, and rainbow lanyards, helped reassure young people that they were welcome, but they stressed that real inclusion is demonstrated through consistent, informed practice, not just symbols.

- **Peer relationships** could either enhance or undermine safety. Where staff were proactive in placement decisions and mediated conflict, peers became allies. Where staff were absent or reactive, hostility and harassment were more common.

> **"All services are defined by the staff that work for them... if you have staff who genuinely care and genuinely show up for the sake of the people they're looking after, then the service as a whole is going to run better."**
>
> *- Jamie*

THE RIGHT WAY TO ASK

Our research identified six key principles for asking identity questions that promote safety and, as a result, support young people to disclose accurate data:

- **Emphasise choice.** Some young people preferred a short form for privacy, others valued a conversation. All agreed questions should be respectful, allow space to self-describe, and remain entirely optional.

- **Keep it personal, not procedural.** Questions that feel medical, administrative, or 'for funding' undermine trust. Young people wanted genuine curiosity and care, not to feel categorised or reduced to a tick-box.

- **Ask at the right time.** Most identity questions should come once trust has developed. Pronouns are the exception and should be asked upfront to avoid misgendering. Once disclosed, identity information shouldn't dominate interactions or be over-emphasised.

- **Ask in the right way.** Staff should avoid trivialising, assuming, or guessing labels, and use open, respectful language. Tone matters: discomfort, formality or haste made young people feel unsafe, while calm, curious, accepting approaches signalled respect.

- **Minimise repeated disclosures with care.** Where appropriate, identity information should be shared between trusted staff to avoid repeated disclosures, but only with consent and in line with data protection. Staff should not assume information from other providers is accurate if it may have been shared under different circumstances.

- **Always prioritise transparency.** Young people wanted clear explanations about why identity information is collected, who will see it, and how it will be used. Staff also needed this clarity so they could communicate it confidently and consistently.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research points to the following recommendations, co-developed with Young Advisors. They are organised around two, interconnected areas of practice: fostering inclusive environments; and generating robust identity-related datasets. Crucially, these elements reinforce one another: inclusive environments make disclosure more likely, and better data helps organisations strengthen inclusion further. Implementing the actions outlined will create positive change across all scenarios considered in this research.

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

To create environments where all young people feel valued, respected and free to be themselves, service providers should:

1. **Embed visible signs of authentic inclusivity across all services.**
   Inclusivity should be visible through affirming symbols, public statements of support, and diverse staff representation. Safe, welcoming spaces and everyday respectful practice (including correct pronoun use) helps LGBTQ+ young people feel recognised and supported. Inclusion must be consistent across services, not dependent on individual teams.

2. **Strengthen policies and procedures around inclusivity.**
   Inclusivity must be embedded in clear, co-produced policies, not left to individual interpretation. Organisations should set consistent guidance on responding to discrimination or harassment and improve reporting routes so young people can raise concerns safely, directly, and with clear lines of accountability for action.

3. **Deliver comprehensive practical, regularly-updated training.**
   Staff need confidence and up-to-date knowledge to support LGBTQ+ young people well. Staff should receive training on inclusive practice that is co-developed with young people, intersectional, practical, delivered in person, and backed by accessible resources.

4. **Support peers to be informed and inclusive.**
   Inclusive environments depend on young people as well as staff. Services should set clear expectations for respectful behaviour, provide learning opportunities, manage placements thoughtfully, and promote peer allyship and mutual respect.

GENERATING MORE ROBUST, IDENTITY—RELATED DATA

To generate robust datasets that more accurately reflect young people's realities, service providers should:

1. **Agree what identity data should be collected** and establish a clear, shared rationale for doing so. This should underpin all communication materials, training and system design.

2. **Develop clear messaging, including co-developed staff prompts** so that all staff can explain, confidently and consistently, why identity data is collected and how it will be used.

3. **Implement standardised but flexible processes** for collecting identity data, grounded in choice, respect, and transparency. Core expectations should be consistent e.g. always asking about pronouns, explaining purpose, offering the option not to answer, but there should be flexibility for staff to judge timing, depth, and mode of disclosure, depending on the context and individual.

4. **Provide adequate training on inclusive data collection**, co-created with young people. This training should equip staff to understand terminology, use systems confidently, and handle sensitive conversations with accuracy and care.

5. **Introduce fit-for-purpose recording systems** that make identity data easy to enter and interpret. Fields should balance inclusivity with practicality, include definition reminders and options for recording reasons for missing data, and reflect the agreed scope of what should be collected.

BUILDING ON THIS RESEARCH

This study sheds important light on the visibility gap, but it also points to areas for deeper investigation:

• **Wider participant diversity:** This research involved a small, self-selecting group of young people. Whilst their insights have been invaluable, this suggests the need for research involving young people with varied backgrounds, including those not in contact with services or who do not use LGBTQ+ terminology.

• **Sector-wide comparison:** Many of the challenges identified in this research, such as concerns about safety, staff confidence, and system limitations, are likely to be relevant to services across the sector. However, research across different providers and service types would help distinguish sector-wide patterns from organisation or service-specific issues.

• **Understanding the disclosure–recording divide:** Further work is needed to explore how young people perceive data sharing and how systems and processes can better translate relational disclosures into recorded data.

• **Influence of organisational culture:** Understanding more about how leadership, staff confidence, and team culture shape inclusion and data quality would help strengthen future practice.

DEPAUL

Homelessness has no place

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