

HOMELESSNESS AMONG LGBT ADULTS in the US

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BRIEF / MAY 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study is the first to provide estimates of the percentage of sexual and gender minority adults experiencing homelessness compared to cisgender straight adults using representative national data. We provide estimates of homelessness (both recent experiences and lifetime prevalence) from three nationally representative surveys of U.S. adults conducted between 2016 and 2019 measuring sexual orientation and gender identity.

We examined the proportion of people who had **recent experiences with homelessness** (in the form of living temporarily with friends or family, living in a shelter or group home, or living in a place not intended for housing such as on the street, park, car, or abandoned building) in the 12 months prior to being surveyed. We found that:

- 8% of transgender adults across all sexual orientation identities;
- 3% of cisgender and genderqueer sexual minority adults;
- and 1% of cisgender straight adults reported indicators of recent homelessness.
- Among sexual minority adults, African American respondents had significantly higher rates (6%) of recent housing instability.

We also assessed the proportion of people who had experienced **homelessness at any time in their life** (measured only among cisgender and genderqueer sexual minority adults). We found that:

- 17% of sexual minority adults reported they experienced lifetime homelessness, which is more than twice what we have found in a general population study.
- Most respondents (71%) who had ever experienced homelessness did so as adults.

The study findings support concerns that homelessness is experienced at disproportional rates among sexual and gender minority people.

OVERVIEW

The assumption of overrepresentation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people among those experiencing homelessness is widely discussed by policy makers and advocates, but very few studies have documented this using methods that reliably produce population estimates.¹ Previous reports by the Williams Institute are often cited, but even these have been limited to reports of service providers surveyed using convenience sampling methods at the organizational level.² Further, most work focused on this topic estimated youth homelessness and not the experience of homelessness throughout adulthood.³ We know that in California, approximately 25% of youth in schools who report forms of unstable housing are LGBT.⁴ Nationally, one study estimated that 22% of youth experiencing homelessness across 22 U.S. counties are LGB.⁵ Regarding adults, there are no nationally representative datasets of the population of people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity that include measures of sexual orientation and gender identity.

BACKGROUND

There is no singular definition of homelessness guiding a federal response to this problem.⁶ However, because even a single experience of being without permanent shelter can have negative impacts on health and economic stability,⁷ we adopt here the expanded view of homelessness in line with other researchers studying this issue among LGBT youth and adults,⁸ which includes multiple indicators of housing instability such as living on the streets, in shelters, and in other types of temporary situations (e.g., couch surfing, group homes). Other related terms for this social issue include “unstably housed” and “housing instability”; here, we use these interchangeably with “homelessness” as a way to represent an experience that people may have for various periods of time in their lives, and not as a demographic variable or personal characteristic.

Ideally, we would know how many adults who are unstably housed are LGBT, because this would help us understand the relevance of sexual orientation and gender identity for those who currently need services.

¹ Bruce, D., Stall, R., Fata, A., & Campbell, R. T. (2014). Modeling minority stress effects on homelessness and health disparities among young men who have sex with men. *Journal of Urban Health*, 91, 568–580.

² Choi, S. K., Wilson, B. D. M., Shelton, J., & Gates, G. (2015). *Serving our youth 2015: The needs and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth experiencing homelessness*. Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute with True Colors Fund.

³ Ecker, J., Aubry, T., & Sylvestre, J. (2019). Pathways into homelessness among LGBTQ2S adult *Homosexuality*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/00918369.2019.1600902

⁴ Baams, L., Wilson, B. D. M., & Russell, S. T. (2019). LGBTQ youth in unstable housing and foster care. *Pediatrics*, 143, e20174211.

⁵ Dworsky, A., Van Drunen, M., & Gitlow, E. (2017). *Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) youth count and brief youth survey: Technical report*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

⁶ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *Permanent supportive housing: Evaluating the evidence for improving health outcomes among people experiencing chronic homelessness*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Press. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519590/>; See also, 42 U.S. Code §11302 and the U.S. Department of Education definition of homelessness using the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001 (<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg116.html>).

⁷ Oppenheimer, S.C., Nurius, P. S., & Green, S. (2016). Homelessness history impacts on health outcomes and economic and risk behavior intermediaries: New insights from population data. *Families in Society*, 43, 576–585.

⁸ Shelton, J., DeChants, J., Bender, K., Hsu, H., Maria, D., Petering, R., ... Barman-Adhikari, A. (2018). Homelessness and housing experiences among LGBTQ young adults in seven U.S. cities. *Cityscape*, 20, 9–34. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/26524870

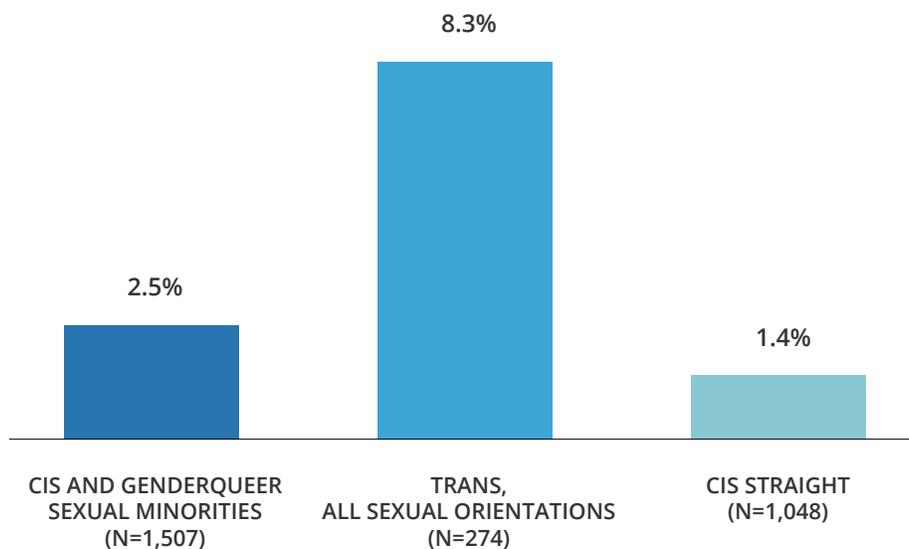
However, another way to understand whether sexual orientation and gender identity matter in efforts to reduce homelessness is to examine whether sexual and gender minority people experience housing instability at different rates than cisgender heterosexual people. We provide data on homelessness (both recent experiences and lifetime prevalence) from three nationally representative surveys of U.S. adults measuring sexual orientation and gender identity. These three surveys conducted through the Generations Study and TransPop Study provide estimates of homelessness among transgender people (of all sexual orientations), sexual minorities (who are cisgender and genderqueer, but not transgender identified), and cisgender heterosexual (straight) people. See the Methods Note for details regarding the studies from which the data were drawn.

FINDINGS

RECENT EXPERIENCES WITH HOMELESSNESS AMONG SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITY ADULTS

Approximately 8% of transgender adults of diverse sexual orientation identities (hereafter referred to as transgender for readability) reported recent experiences of homelessness in the 12 months prior to being interviewed in the form of living temporarily with friends or family, in a shelter or group home, or in a place not intended for housing such as on the street or in a car, park, or abandoned building.⁹ By contrast, 3% of cisgender and genderqueer sexual minority adults (hereafter referred to as sexual minorities for readability) and 1% of cisgender¹⁰ straight adults (hereafter referred to as cis straight for readability) reported recent experiences with homelessness (Figure 1). Looking at the confidence intervals from these separate samples, it appears that a significantly higher proportion of transgender people reported recent housing instability compared to both sexual minority and cis straight people (see Table 1).

Figure 1. Recent experiences with homelessness by sexual orientation and gender identity



⁹ Herman, J., & O'Neill, K. (2020). *Vulnerabilities to COVID-19 among transgender adults in the U.S.* Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute. Retrieved from <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Trans-COVID19-Apr-2020.pdf>; see this report for an estimate of experiences with homelessness among transgender adults using a more restricted definition of homelessness (having lived in a shelter, on the street, or in a car, park, or abandoned building in the last 12 months).

¹⁰ Cisgender refers to a person whose gender identity is the same as their sex assigned at birth; hereinafter abbreviated as cis.

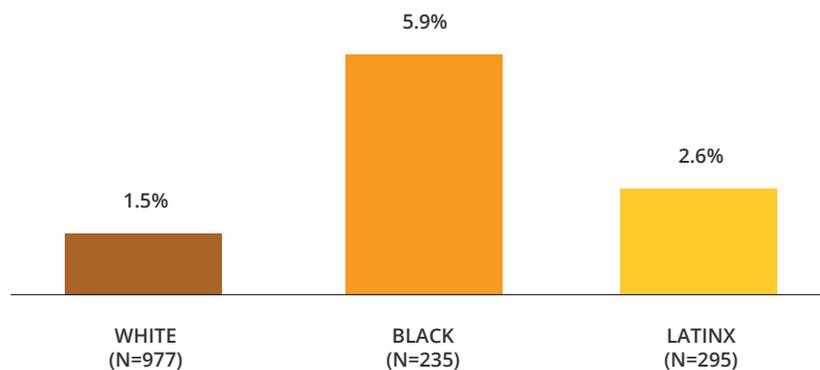
Table 1. Estimates and 95% confidence intervals for recent experiences with homelessness across the three samples

	LIVING TEMPORARILY WITH FRIENDS OR FAMILY, IN A SHELTER OR GROUP HOME, OR IN A PLACE NOT INTENDED FOR HOUSING IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS	
	% (n)	95% CI
Cis and genderqueer sexual minorities (N=1,507)	2.5 (34)	1.68, 3.67
Transgender, all sexual orientations (N=274)	8.3 (17)	4.82, 13.9
Cis straight (N=1,048)	1.4 (6)	.539, 3.52

Racial and ethnic differences in recent experiences with homelessness among sexual minorities were significant, indicating disproportionately higher rates of recent experiences with homelessness among Black sexual minority people (Figure 2). Due to small sample sizes, we could not conduct statistical tests among subgroups of transgender and cis straight people (these values are provided in shaded text in Appendix A).

In addition to race and ethnicity, we examined differences by gender identity (trans woman, trans man, cis woman, cis man, and gender queer/nonbinary), age groups (young adult, 18-25 years vs. older, 26 years or older), and gender expression (highly gender nonconforming vs. gender conforming) across all sexual orientation and gender identity groups. There were no significant differences (see Appendix A).

Figure 2. Recent experiences with homelessness by race and ethnicity among cis and genderqueer sexual minorities



LIFETIME HOMELESSNESS AMONG CISGENDER AND GENDERQUEER SEXUAL MINORITY ADULTS

We also assessed prevalence of lifetime homelessness in our population-based sample of sexual minority adults (this question was not asked in our surveys of transgender adults and cis straight people). Here, we find that 17% reported experiencing homelessness at some point in their lifetime, whereas the estimate of lifetime prevalence of homelessness in another study of the general population was approximately 6%¹¹ (Figure 3).

¹¹No federally funded surveys routinely ask about people's lifetime experiences of homelessness. However, one study of older adults in the United States asked this question: "Have you ever been homeless or lived in a shelter?" The study found that 6.2% of respondents reported having experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. Confidence intervals for the estimate were not provided. Fusaro, V. A., Levy, H. G., & Shaefer, H. L. (2018). Racial and ethnic disparities in the lifetime prevalence of homelessness in the United States. *Demography*, 55, 2119–2128. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-018-0717-0>. Given that the general population estimate likely included a small percentage of sexual minorities, we expect that the real cis heterosexual lifetime prevalence for homelessness is even smaller.

Among sexual minorities who experienced homelessness, the majority (71%) experienced it as an adult (age 18 years or older), 20% experienced homelessness before the age of 18, and 9% reported homelessness experiences in both youth and adulthood (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Lifetime experience with homelessness among sexual minorities and the general adult population

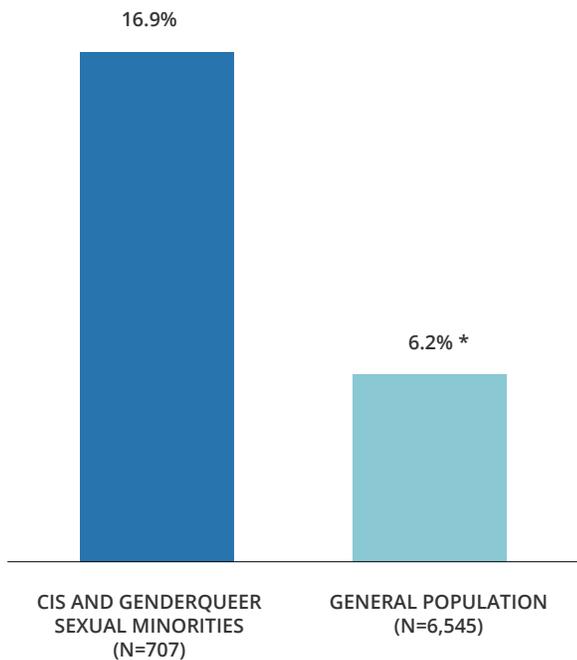
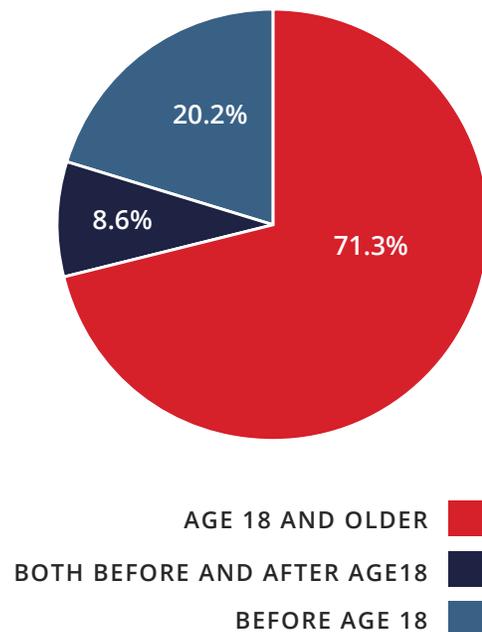


Figure 4. Age when experiencing homelessness



*Fusaro, Levy, & Shaefer (2018); see footnote 12 for full reference.

We examined whether there were any subgroup differences in experiences with lifetime homelessness in terms of race and ethnicity, gender identity, and level of gender conformity (See Appendix A for Tables with estimates and confidence intervals). Regarding the sexual minority sample by race and ethnicity, 23% of Latinx, 18% of Black or African American, and 15% of White sexual minorities reported having experienced homelessness, though these differences were not statistically significant.

Regarding gender identity among sexual minorities, 22% of genderqueer or nonbinary people, 17% of cis women, and 15% of cis men experienced homelessness. Additionally, 28% of sexual minorities who were highly gender nonconforming reported experiencing homelessness in their lifetime, whereas only 15% of those who were gender conforming had this experience. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

IMPLICATIONS

This study is the first to provide estimates of the proportion of sexual and gender minority people in the United States experiencing homelessness compared to cis straight people using a representative national sample. In this case, we have data for both recent and lifetime prevalence of homelessness among sexual minority people and only recent homelessness for transgender people. We see a significantly higher proportion of transgender people across sexual orientations reported recent housing instability compared to both cis and genderqueer sexual minority and cis straight people. Also, 17% of cis and genderqueer sexual minority people reported they experienced homelessness in their lifetime, which is more than twice that found in a study of the general population.

The reason for the lack of differences in rates of recent homelessness between cis and genderqueer sexual minorities and cis straight people is unclear, especially given the large differences in rates of lifetime homelessness. One possible explanation is that sexual minority people who are more economically secure may be more likely to volunteer for a survey than those who are not.¹² Although we found that LGB people and other sexual minorities are more likely to experience unstable housing at some point in their life, the survey sample may be skewed toward people who are currently stably housed. It is plausible that unstably housed people have more difficulties maintaining a phone (which was our sampling frame) and thus were missed. Even if reached for sampling, it requires some form of stability to have a functioning phone, tablet, or computer and internet connectivity, or a mailing address, to respond to the self-administered online or mailed questionnaire.

Both subgroup differences and similarities in rates of homelessness point to important issues that could inform public policies and services. Among cis and genderqueer LGB people, African Americans had particularly high rates of recent experiences of homelessness. Although the sample sizes did not allow for racial and ethnic comparisons among transgender and cis straight people, the data suggest this may be a pattern across all groups. Given the high rates of poverty among people of color, whether LGBT or not,¹³ it is not surprising that we would also see high rates of recent housing insecurity. Knowing that homelessness historically has been experienced disproportionately by African Americans¹⁴ indicates a need to address housing instability among Black LGBT people in complex ways that are inclusive of, but not limited to, LGBT advocacy frameworks.

It is also notable that younger (18-25 years) and older (26+ years) adult sexual and gender minorities had similar rates of recent experiences with homelessness. However, in a previous study of youth in middle and high schools, scholars found higher rates of current housing instability than what we see in this study for young adults.¹⁵ Typically, research on youth homelessness focuses anywhere between ages 10-29 years, meaning it is often inclusive of young adulthood (also called emerging adulthood). Yet, there may be meaningful differences in rates of and experiences with housing instability among LGBT youth under 18 years compared to those that are young adults. These possible differences between age groups among LGBT youth requires further examination. Additionally, we found that most of the cis and genderqueer sexual minority respondents who had experienced homelessness at some point in their lifetime did so for the first time as adults. This emphasizes that although youth homelessness is an important issue among LGBT people, so is adult homelessness. Yet adult homelessness among sexual and gender minorities has received far less attention by advocates and public policy experts than youth homelessness. It is necessary to expand the scope of study and intervention of homelessness across the lifetime of LGBT people.

¹²We hypothesize that the composition of the cis and genderqueer sexual minority sample leans toward those who are more stably housed based on our analyses of the income disparity between completers and noncompleters of the survey. See Meyer, I. H., Marken, S., Russell, S. T., Frost, D. M., & Wilson, B. D. M. (2020). An innovative approach to the design of a national probability sample of sexual minority adults. *LGBT Health, 7*, 101–108. <https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2019.0145>

¹³Badgett, M. V. L., Choi, S. K., & Wilson, B. D. M., (2019). *LGBT poverty in the United States: A study of differences between sexual orientation and gender identity groups*. Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute.

¹⁴Johnson, R. A. (2010). African Americans and homelessness: Moving through history. *Journal of Black Studies, 40*, 583–605. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934708315487>

¹⁵See reference in footnote #4; see Table 1 in publication which provides values allowing for a calculation of the percent of LGB youth ages 10-18 years who are unstably housed (approximately 5%)

METHODS NOTE

Data are from two studies surveying sexual and gender minorities in the United States. The *Generations Study*, a national probability survey of sexual minority adults, examines the health and well-being across three generations of non-transgender (most were cisgender, about 7% identified as gender nonbinary/genderqueer) sexual minorities aged 18–25, 34–41, and 52–59. Generations is a longitudinal study, surveying the same respondents every year for 3 years. *The TransPop Study* is the first national probability sample of transgender people in the United States, measuring health, identity, stressors, transition-related experiences, and demographics. The TransPop study also includes a comparative cisgender sample. In probability samples, every person is selected at random; therefore, every person in the population that is being studied has a chance to be selected. However, not everyone who is contacted will participate in the study, but sampling techniques allow researchers to correct for this. Probability sampling allows for a better chance of having a representative sample. Detailed information on the study methodologies can be found at www.generations-study.com and www.transpop.org.

Both Generations (Wave 1) and TransPop studies assessed respondents' housing stability. Respondents were asked to indicate where they had lived in the past 12 months from the date they were surveyed. Response options included whether someone owns, rents, or lives in housing that is paid for by a partner or spouse; with family they grew up with; in a nursing home, university housing, or military barracks; or in places that are not intended for housing. Using these responses, we categorized study participants as having stable housing or unstable housing (homelessness).

The measure of self-reported lifetime experiences with homelessness was only included in the third wave of the Generations study, so estimates were limited to sexual minorities who are not transgender. Participants were asked whether they had ever been homeless for at least one night and when they experienced homelessness. We examined both recent and lifetime homelessness by race and ethnicity, age groups, gender identity, and gender expression. For race and ethnicity, respondents reported whether they identified as White, Black or African American, or Latinx. For age, respondents self-reported age was categorized into 18–25 years old and 26 years old or older to assess whether youth and young adult homelessness explained rates of housing instability. For gender identity, survey answer options included woman, man, trans man, trans woman, and genderqueer/nonbinary. Gender expression was categorized into highly gender nonconforming or gender conforming using their sex assigned at birth and answers to questions about appearance and mannerisms. Those categorized as highly gender nonconforming in gender expression reported being “very” or “mostly” feminine in appearance or mannerism and being assigned male gender at birth or were assigned female gender at birth and reported being “very” or “mostly” masculine in appearance or mannerism.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Generations is funded by a grant from Office of the Director at the National Institutes of Health and the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD grant 1R01HD078526) and through supplemental grants from the National Institutes of Health's Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research and the Office of Research on Women's Health. The Generations investigators are Ilan H. Meyer, Ph.D., (PI), David M. Frost, Ph.D., Phillip L. Hammack, Ph.D., Marguerita Lightfoot, Ph.D., Stephen T. Russell, Ph.D., and Bianca D.M. Wilson, Ph.D. (Co-Investigators, listed alphabetically). TransPop Study is funded by a grant from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD grant R01HD090468). The TransPop investigators are Ilan H. Meyer (PI), Walter O. Bockting, Ph.D., Jody L. Herman, Ph.D., and Sari L. Reisner, Ph.D. It is also supported by the National Institute of Health's Office of Social and Behavior Science an Office of Research on Women's Health, and as part of a supplemental grant for the Generations Study. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

We thank Dr. Jama Shelton (Assistant Professor of Social Work at Silberman School of Social Work, Hunter College), and Jocelyn Samuels (Williams Institute, Executive Director) for their feedback.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Wilson, B. D. M., Choi, S. K., Harper, G. W., Lightfoot, M., Russell, S., & Meyer, I.H. (2020). *Homelessness among LGBT adults in the U.S.* Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute.

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APPENDIX A

Table A1. Recent experiences with homelessness by race and ethnicity of sexual and gender minorities and cis-straight people

RACE AND ETHNICITY	WHITE		BLACK		LATINX	
	% (n)	95% CI	% (n)	95% CI	% (n)	95% CI
Cis and genderqueer sexual minorities	1.5% (15)	0.8, 2.7	5.9% (13)	3.2, 10.6	2.6% (6)	1.0, 6.4
Transgender (all sexual orientations)	7.6% (8)	3.4, 15.8	5.5% (3)	1.5, 19	7.2% (2)	1.8, 25.2
Cis straight	0.3% (2)	0.1, 1.1	6.5% (3)	1.9, 20.2	4.9% (1)	0.7, 27.5

Shaded cells contain unstable estimates with cell sizes representing fewer than five participants.

Table A2. Recent experiences with homelessness by gender identity of sexual and gender minorities and cis-straight people

GENDER IDENTITY	CIS MAN		CIS WOMAN		TRANS MAN		TRANS WOMAN		NONBINARY OR GENDERQUEER	
	% (n)	95% CI	% (n)	95% CI	% (n)	95% CI	% (n)	95% CI	% (n)	95% CI
Cis and genderqueer sexual minorities	2.0% (14)	1.1, 3.6	2.7% (14)	1.5, 5.0					4.8% (6)	2.1, 10.9
Transgender (all sexual orientations)					1.7% (1)	0.3, 11.7	19% (14)	10.7, 31.3	1.8% (2)	0.3, 9.2
Cis straight	1.4% (4)	0.4, 5.0	1.4% (2)	0.3, 5.6						

Shaded cells contain unstable estimates with cell sizes representing fewer than five participants.

Table A3. Recent experiences with homelessness by age of sexual and gender minorities and cis straight people

	AGE 18-25		AGE 26+	
	% (n)	95% CI	% (n)	95% CI
Cis and genderqueer sexual minorities	2.0% (2)	0.4, 10.2	2.6% (32)	1.7, 3.8
Transgender (all sexual orientations)	13.3% (11)	7.2, 23.1	3.4% (6)	1.1, 9.8
Cis straight	18.6% (1)	2.6, 65.8	1.2% (5)	0.4, 3.4

Shaded cells contain unstable estimates with cell sizes representing fewer than five participants.

Table A4. Recent experiences with homelessness by gender conformity of sexual and gender minorities and cis straight people

	HIGHLY GENDER NONCONFORMING		GENDER CONFORMING	
	% (n)	95% CI	% (n)	95% CI
Cis and genderqueer	2.0% (2)	0.4, 10.2	2.6% (32)	1.7, 3.8
Transgender (all sexual orientations)	13.3% (11)	7.2, 23.1	3.4% (6)	1.1, 9.8
Cis straight	18.6% (1)	2.6, 65.8	1.2% (5)	0.4, 3.4

Shaded cells contain unstable estimates with cell sizes representing fewer than five participants.

Table A5. Lifetime Experiences with homelessness by race/ethnicity, gender identity, and gender conformity among cisgender and genderqueer sexual minority adults

	EVER BEEN HOMELESS FOR AT LEAST ONE NIGHT (N=99)	
	% (n)	95% CI
Race/Ethnicity		
White	15 (74)	10.8, 19.4
Black/African American	18 (11)	8.57, 32.3
Latinx	23 (14)	13.2, 37.9
Current gender identity		
Cis Women	17.1 (48)	11.8, 24.2
Cis Men	15.3 (39)	10.1, 22.7
Genderqueer/nonbinary	21.7 (12)	10.5, 39.4
Gender expression		
Highly gender nonconforming	27.7 (8)	12.2, 51.4
Gender conforming	15 (91)	12.2, 20.6