



Collecting Data Related to Sexual Orientation,
Gender Identity, and Gender Expression (SOGIE)
from Youth in Transitional Living Programs (TLPs)



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These findings have been drawn from a multicity project conducted to understand the unique challenges of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. Part of a larger initiative, *3/40 Blueprint: Creating the Blueprint to Reduce LGBTQ Youth Homelessness*, this summary describes how youth and service providers can discuss SOGIE issues in an effective, meaningful way.

Key Findings: Youth Disclosure of SOGIE

Youth from five of the nine agencies included in the assessment recalled providers asking them about SOGIE, either through documentation or during an intake interview. Those asked had a wide range of opinions regarding whether they wanted to disclose SOGIE information, and if so, to whom and under what circumstances.

Attitudes about disclosing SOGIE information varied widely among participants:

- Approximately 25% of the youth reported they did not want to disclose SOGIE information to providers at TLPs, at least until after they had evaluated the environment.
- Disclosure was linked to perceptions of safety, an affirming agency culture, provider attitudes, and the way in which the information was solicited.
- Some youth reported they felt SOGIE did not matter, while others felt no need to openly disclose because they thought it should be obvious they identified as LGBTQ.
- Some youth were unsure of their SOGIE or how to discuss it with providers because they lacked the vocabulary to describe themselves.
- Youth favored private disclosure to public, and some favored informal or conversational methods of inquiry to formal or standardized methods such as intake forms.

Youth wanted to know the purpose of collecting SOGIE information and how the information would be used. A number of youth reported feeling more comfortable with disclosure when they knew SOGIE also would assist in service provision.

Key Findings: Providers' Views about Youth Disclosure of SOGIE

Those employed at TLPs inquired about youth SOGIE in order to adequately address the needs of LGBTQ runaway and homeless youth (RHY). However, this process might be uncomfortable for both the youth and the provider. Multiple challenges were reported impacting the data collection process.

Most agencies did not have a standardized SOGIE data collection process. For those that did collect SOGIE information, each process was unique including the questions used to elicit information.

- Some agencies only collected SOGIE information if the youth was referred to the TLP from an LGBTQ-specific service provider or if the TLP was specifically designated to provide services to LGBTQ youth.
- There were some discrepancies between youth and provider reports regarding whether SOGIE information was collected at their agency.
- There were discrepancies within some agencies concerning the data collection process.
- If SOGIE information was collected, it usually occurred at intake, although on occasion it was taken at discharge.
- Questions ranged from SOGIE to preferred pronouns and the gender listed on the youth's birth certificate.
- There were challenges when attempting to update existing databases, particularly federal databases, to include SOGIE information. Many existing databases do not contain fields for recording such data.

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- There was a perception that youth are forced to “fit in boxes.” Such limitations did not allow for self-identification beyond prescribed categories, nor did they support fluidity in identities.
- The use of predetermined categories led to the erasure of some identities and the over- or under-representation of others.

For 67% of the providers in this study, funders required SOGIE data about youth to be collected as a part of meeting funding requirements. Such requirements were viewed as challenging for several reasons:

- The pre-designated categories which were required to be completed were not always accurately representative of a youth’s SOGIE; thus youth did not always easily fit into a category
- Staff felt uncomfortable discussing SOGIE, causing the collection of data to feel intrusive
- Data were often collected for multiple systems and this cumbersome, duplicative process took time away from direct service provision

Discussing SOGIE at TLPs: Implications for Policy and Practice

Youth had mixed feelings about disclosing their SOGIE to service providers. This was not surprising due to the high incidence of trauma experienced by homeless youth, and because for many of these youth, disclosure of their SOGIE may have been a factor in their experience with homelessness. Thus, taking a trauma-informed approach to speaking with youth about SOGIE is essential to being able to elicit the necessary SOGIE related information. At the same time, it is important to be respectful of youth who are reluctant to disclose SOGIE information, especially at first contact.

Determining how and when to ask. There is no single, right way to inquire about a youth’s SOGIE. Suggestions include:

- Explaining why the data is being collected
- Letting a youth know who will have access to their information
- Letting a youth know under what conditions their information will be made available
- Making sure that SOGIE-related questions are not on the first page or at the top of the page near the youth’s name on intake documents or assessment tools, to protect the youth’s privacy
- Building a rapport with youth who are reluctant to disclose SOGIE upon initial contact; it may help to ask informally, such as inquiring about past or current relationships or making an open-ended comment about the larger LGBTQ community

Be respectful of youth who ultimately refuse to disclose their SOGIE, and respect those who are unsure of or questioning their sexual and/or gender identity.

Remember:

- These youth are still experiencing developmental changes and they may not have a strong sense of their SOGIE or the vocabulary to accurately define or describe them.
- LGBTQ youth, just like heterosexual or cisgender youth, may need additional education around the SOGIE spectrums and the pitfalls of assuming someone else’s SOGIE based on speech, mannerisms, dress, or other aspects of gender expression.

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Collecting SOGIE information for funding

requirements. Providers who received government grants and other external funding were responsible for collecting and reporting SOGIE information to those funders. There remained a number of concerns about how to collect and record SOGIE information, how the data would be used, with whom it could or would be shared, and under what circumstances it will be made available. Suggestions include:

- Asking youth about SOGIE as part of a standard demographic questionnaire or intake interview, much like being asked about age or ethnicity
- Providers clearly explaining the purpose of collecting SOGIE information and describing the circumstances under which the information may be shared with others without the youth's explicit consent
- Making youth, staff, and administrators aware of the reasons, beyond legislative and funding mandates, for collecting SOGIE information; sharing this information can broaden the understanding of how SOGIE and other identity-based information can be used to help address the unique needs of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness

SOGIE discussion training and language review.

All staff and administrators should receive training about what types of SOGIE-based information needs to be collected, and how this will be achieved.

- Agency leadership should regularly evaluate how direct staff service ask youth about SOGIE.
- Agencies should also examine the language being used and ensure it is inclusive and up to date.
- Sexual orientation and gender identity should never be assessed as binary categories.
- Similarly, staff and administrators must be made aware that how they ask about SOGIE will influence a youth's disclosure process. For example, asking,

“have you been in a same-sex relationship?” may yield different data than asking “have you had any same-sex sexual partners?”

Inclusive data collection systems. Data collection often requires providers to enter information into standardized databases with a limited set of categories that reflect a funder's needs. The lack of inclusive categories forces providers to make choices about where youth fit into those predefined categories and does not likely reflect the true diversity of the TLP's population. This restriction can necessitate translation by the provider to ensure a youth's self-identified SOGIE is consistent with the categories provided in the data reporting systems. The following are recommended:

- All data collection tools and data systems should allow youth to self-identify, and supplement the list of predefined SOGIE identities with an identity that more accurately reflects the youth's own.
- Data collection systems should not be fixed just once, but updated as necessary, since youth identities are often fluid and may evolve over time.
- A more user-friendly integration among the multiple layers of federal, state, and agency-level data management systems would reduce data entry time and minimize redundant work.
- Be honest and transparent with youth. They may be placed into categories that do not match their gender identity or gender expression. Explain this may occur due to the restrictions placed by funders in order to meet finding requirements, not because they are not being accepted for who they are.
- Funders, such as federal agencies, should expand the number of categories provided as options so youth can be accurately classified according to their SOGIE.

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Disclaimer: The individuals depicted in this report are models and the image has been used solely for illustrative purposes.

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