




ON THE STREETS

Facing discrimination on all sides, queer homeless youth in New York City have few places to go.

BY KRISTEN V. BROWN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
SAMANTHA BOX



NETTY BROWN and Star Johnson are like most young couples. They go to college, take walks along the water, read, write poetry. And, most importantly, they're finally both 21, which means they can go out and party sometimes, too.

Unlike most twentysomething couples, Brown and Johnson are homeless, splitting nights between the grimy plastic seats of the New York City subway and friends' couches. That was until they found shelter at Sylvia's Place, just one of three LGBT-specific youth shelters that have opened in the city since 2002 to deal with the overflow of homeless queer youth.

At Sylvia's Place, Brown and Johnson, along with 26 other young people in this 20-bed facility, sleep on the floor, share only one shower and fight off mice. But at least, they say, from 6 p.m. until 8 a.m., they have a safe place to call home—even if that place is an industrial loft with no real beds.

"It's just good to be off the street and out of the cold," says Brown. "We sleep on the floor, and a lot of people ask us how we can do that every night. But it's good, for the moment, just to have a place to shower and change."

Brown and Johnson are but a small part of New York's homeless youth, one-third of whom identify as LGBT, according to a 2007 estimate by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. The City of New York also recently confirmed this figure in a study by the Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services.

Unlike much of the homeless population, many queer homeless youth have either been kicked out of their homes or have run away from them, often because of discrimination due to their sexual orien-

tation. Almost everyone at Sylvia's Place can share at least one traumatic story from their journey to achieve freedom for their sexual identity.

"We're all here because we're either runaways or throwaways," says Djai Xi, a 19-year-old transgender teen from Queens. Xi left home at an early age and traveled through Kentucky, Washington state and Pennsylvania in search of somewhere secure before landing back in New York at Sylvia's Place five years later. She's come to regard the shelter as her makeshift home.

Johnson and Brown, like Xi, are both runaways. "I had a huge fight with my brothers about being a lesbian and my mom told me to get out," says Brown. "So I did. They couldn't accept who I was, so I couldn't stay there."

Brown left her Brooklyn home shortly after coming out at 16. She alternated nights between friends' couches and sometimes sleeping on the streets, returning back home at 18 only after she found out her mother had AIDS. But one week before last Christmas, after financial troubles got her family evicted, Brown found herself out on the streets again and without the support of the rest of her family.

This time, Johnson—who had met Brown several months before at the Interboro Institute in New York, where they were both students—decided to join her.

"She ended up on the street and I wasn't going to leave her there," says Johnson. Her decision was based in part on her own living arrangements with her grandmother, who had several times spoken out against the LGBT population.



**"OUR
COMMUNITY
IS IN CRISIS—
THERE'S
VERY
LIMITED
AMOUNTS
OF BEDS FOR
LGBT YOUTH,
THERE'S
VERY LITTLE
SERVICES
THAT ARE
SAFE."**

"She told me if she ever found out I was a lesbian, she would kick me out," says Johnson. She couldn't bring Brown home, so instead she spent the nights with her—sleeping in subway cars and using friends' apartments to shower and change. The couple repeated the same cycle every day for months while managing to keep their part-time jobs as a nanny and a secretary and still attend college classes.

"From day one I got evicted, she's been with me—that's a long time," says Brown.

Shelters like Sylvia's Place on West 36th Street attempt to provide relief, as well as case management and medical care. But with fewer than 50 beds citywide, LGBT shelters are calling the problem of disenfranchised queer youth an epidemic. There are transitional living programs that help LGBT youth get off the streets, but it can take months to find housing through these, and there are few options in the meantime—other city-sponsored youth shelters are unwelcoming.

"You can't set up a system for runaway and homeless youth without acknowledging the huge percentage that fall into the category of LGBT," says New York City Councilman Lewis Fidler (D-Brooklyn), who has continually pushed for more youth shelter funding. "Our numbers clearly show that it's 30 to 40 percent."

When Fidler first set out to expand the city's youth shelter program six years ago, Covenant House, a shelter run by the Catholic Church, was one of the only publicly funded youth shelter programs. "We were very, very troubled by the low percentage that Covenant House identified as LGBT youth—about 3 percent," says Fidler, who also says that at the time, the shelter actually had empty beds, in spite of a massive homeless youth population.

Since 2006 the Department of Youth and Community Development, which operates Runaway and Homeless Youth Services, has certified two new programs specifically contracted to provide services for queer youth. Advocates, however, charge that requirements for certification from DYCD, such as gender segregation, are not possible in queer youth shelters. They also claim that Covenant House, the city's largest youth shelter, is not safe for queer youth. In "mainstream" shelters, they say, LGBT youth struggle with harassment, discrimination and other offenses.

Tiffany Parker, a 23-year-old transgender girl from Alabama, was first placed in a men's shelter when she came to New York. There, she says, she was bullied into performing sexual acts on other men, and then moved to the women's shelter, where some women were alarmed by her masculine appearance. Finally, she ended up at Sylvia's Place, but says she still struggles with things like finding a job because of her gender identity.

"A lot of queer youth are not safe going to Covenant House," says Patrick Markee, a senior policy analyst for the Coalition for the Homeless. "They've experienced firsthand violence or discrimination, which is why we've seen a lot of smaller LGBT shelters opening up. Markee says that while funding has increased in the last two years for queer shelters, funding for shelters like Sylvia's Place is still not adequate, leaving most of the youth to sleep on the floor in sleeping bags.

"Sylvia's Place is great, to a certain extent," says Johnson. "But it lacks a lot because it really doesn't get much funding." While Sylvia's Place offers case working, shelter, food, drop-in services and groups like ballet, creative writing and trans empowerment, it still lacks many resources. Like, for example, enough sleep-

LGBT HOMELESS YOUTH ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Homelessness amongst LGBT youth is not an issue limited to just one city, or even a few cities—it's nationwide. "Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth continue to make up a disproportionate number of runaway and homeless youth—as many as 40 percent," says Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, whose study on homeless queer youth first brought national attention to the subject. "It is a national disgrace that youth continue to be turned out of their homes and communities based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity," says Carey. Here's a look at the homeless LGBT youth situation in cities nationwide.

BOSTON

➤ More than 750 youths between the ages of 18 and 25 were using the emergency shelter system in 2002, the last year that data was publicly available.

➤ An estimated 150 to 300 youths involved with the Boston shelter system identify as LGBT.

➤ The city has supported training to address the needs of homeless LGBT youth at shelters throughout the city, and 2,000 Department of Social Services staff members statewide underwent LGBT awareness training.

➤ Additionally, Waltham House, a private organization in Waltham, Mass., provides services and shelter specifically for LGBT youth.

CHICAGO

➤ Chicago has between 12,000 and 15,000 homeless youth, according to the Night Ministry, an organization serving homeless and runaway youth.

➤ Between 1,500 and 3,000 homeless Chicago youths identify as LGBT.

➤ Fewer than 200 beds are available city-wide for homeless youth, and none are designated specifically for LGBT youth.

➤ Additionally, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless estimates that in the year 2000, 42 percent of youths seeking state-funded shelter for homeless youth were turned away.



DENVER

➤ In 2004, there were 853 homeless youths between the ages of 15 and 25 in metropolitan Denver.

➤ Between 170 and 340 homeless youths identify as LGBT.

➤ The mayor of Denver has implemented a 10-year plan called "Denver's Road Home" aimed at ending homelessness. The program is committed to ending homelessness for every demographic, but there is no specific focus on LGBT youth.



LOS ANGELES

➤ There are estimated to be more than 4,000 homeless youths ages 13 to 21 in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, based on the 2005 Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority census.

➤ Between 830 and 1,660 homeless youths identify as LGBT.

➤ Presently, there are no city-, county- or state-funded programs aimed at homeless LGBT youth; however, the LA Gay & Lesbian Center's Kruks-Tilsner Transitional Living Program provides transitional housing, and Gay & Lesbian Adolescent Social Services (GLASS) provides health and social services to LGBT youth.



ing bags to go around, or even the money to move to a space that meets New York State Office of Children and Family Services regulations, in order to get more funding.

With only 20 beds, Sylvia's Place is the largest single queer youth shelter in the city. Still, employees often find themselves having to turn kids away.

"We're so full right now," says Kate Barnhart, drop-in coordinator at Sylvia's Place. "We have 27 kids in a facility meant for 20. And there are thousands of kids out there."

"Our community is in crisis—there's very limited amounts of beds for LGBT youth, there's very little services that are safe," says Glo Ross, lead organizer at the youth-of-color queer activist group FIERCE. Ross heads a campaign to develop a 24-7 youth center on the decaying Pier 40—another attempt to give queer youth a place to go.

For now, Johnson and Brown are glad to have a home at Sylvia's Place, but they're working hard to get out of the shelter system and into an apartment of their own. They're attending classes at the College of New Rochelle in Brooklyn and doing odd jobs to make money when they have time away from their studies. Brown hopes to become a forensic scientist and Johnson wants to be a nurse.

"The situation is stressful at times, so we argue a bit much," says Johnson. "But we try to stay positive. Loving each other is what gets us through this, at the end of the day."

"When we first met, there were fireworks," adds Johnson, shyly clutching Brown's hand in front of the shelter on a chilly weekday night. "She's everything to me—she's the light I always needed." ■

