



Hetrick-Martin Institute
www.hmi.org

Living at the Intersection:

LGBTQ Youth of Color in New York City



A Report from the Hetrick-Martin Institute
Summer 2015

This report is supported by a generous grant from The Moody's Foundation, a committed partner in helping HMI provide lifesaving services to, and critical advocacy for, LGBTQ youth everywhere.

Hetrick-Martin Institute, 2 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003

Chief Executive Officer's Letter

The rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) people are being realized now more than at any other time in our nation's history; the most significant evidence of this being the Supreme Court's recent decision in favor of same-sex marriage nationwide. As equality for LGBTQ people and the country's consciousness continue to expand, widespread homelessness, social, mental health, and economic disparities (to name a few) persist for LGBTQ youth, especially youth of color.

LGBTQ youth face multiple crises—many struggle with homelessness, hunger, violence, sexual abuse, and family rejection while being ostracized and marginalized based on race, gender expression, and sexual orientation. While these young people may participate in programs designed to address these issues, it is important to remember that LGBTQ youth do not live within the isolation of any one organization. Their lives intersect with the broader systems and institutions that make up our society—government, educational, health, community-based organizations, and so on.

Living at the Intersection tells the stories of five LGBTQ youth of color in their own words. The report gives voice to the comprehensive data HMI collects from LGBTQ youth in its mental health intake assessments and is intended to illuminate the reality of the daily trauma and challenges these young people encounter. What the report reveals is the deep desire of these young people to live, to connect, and to be in-community—and their enduring resilience as they struggle to overcome personal and societal obstacles. It is the strength of these young people that informs HMI's best-practices model of care, and our policy and advocacy work.

The depth and breadth of the challenges these youth face demands that the safety nets of organizations and institutions—designed to impact the ongoing systemic threats to these young people—develop responsive programs and policies that provide safe, inclusive environments in which LGBTQ youth will not only survive, but thrive! To that end, and as described in more detail in this report, HMI has developed a best-practices evaluation and implementation tool, HMI's Five-Point PRYSM (Potential Realization for Youth Service Models) Scan that is being used to help organizations and institutions achieve this goal.

Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI) thanks The Moody's Foundation for its generous support and understanding of the power of data in telling the stories that ground this report.

Sincerely,



Thomas Krever, MPA
Chief Executive Officer

TABLE OF CONTENTS

History & Background	1
Introduction	2-4
Source of Data	5-6
In Their Own Voices	7-24
Creating Systemic Change	25-27
Conclusion	28
References	29 - 30
Acknowledgement	31

History & Background

Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI) was established in 1979 by Dr. Emery Hetrick, a psychiatrist, and Dr. Damien Martin, a professor at New York University, who heard the heartbreaking story of a homeless 15-year-old boy who had been beaten and thrown out of his emergency shelter because he was gay. They were so moved that they gathered a group of concerned adults and created what was then called the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth (IPLGY) to assist LGBTQ young people who desperately needed support. In 1988, the organization was renamed Hetrick-Martin Institute in honor of its founders and their lifelong commitment to service.

Throughout its history HMI has confronted the systemic barriers that our LGBTQ youth face. One such realm, education, was an early priority of the organization, so in 1985 HMI founded what would become known as the Harvey Milk High School (HMHS). HMHS, a New York City Public transfer high school located within our premises, provides a safe learning environment for LGBTQ and other marginalized youth that is free of victimization, bullying, and harassment.

Today, HMI is recognized as the nation's oldest and largest community-based organization focused on serving LGBTQ youth. With an ongoing commitment to both policy and direct service delivery, HMI has evolved from a grassroots social service agency to a highly respected standard bearer and creator of innovative programs, policies, and strategies that are being replicated both nationally and internationally.

In 2013, working from a clear understanding of the synergy between program and policy, HMI expanded its policy and training reach by creating the HMI Center for LGBTQ Youth Advocacy and Capacity Building. The goal of this center is to create a paradigm shift by removing systemic barriers that impact the lives of LGBTQ youth. We do this by enhancing the knowledge and capacity of government agencies and institutions and youth service providers (LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ) to better serve the needs of disenfranchised youth in effective and culturally competent ways.

In 2014, HMI established a new nonprofit organization, HMI: New Jersey. Based in Newark, this new community-based organization provides services for LGBTQ youth, primarily youth of color, who had been traveling to HMI in New York City to receive life-saving and affirming services. Using our best practices and innovative model of care, HMI: New Jersey is currently providing mental health services, after-school programming, and supportive services, as well as trainings and program development to CBOs and governmental agencies. The replication of our model in New Jersey speaks directly to HMI's mission to create safer and more supportive environments for LGBTQ youth.

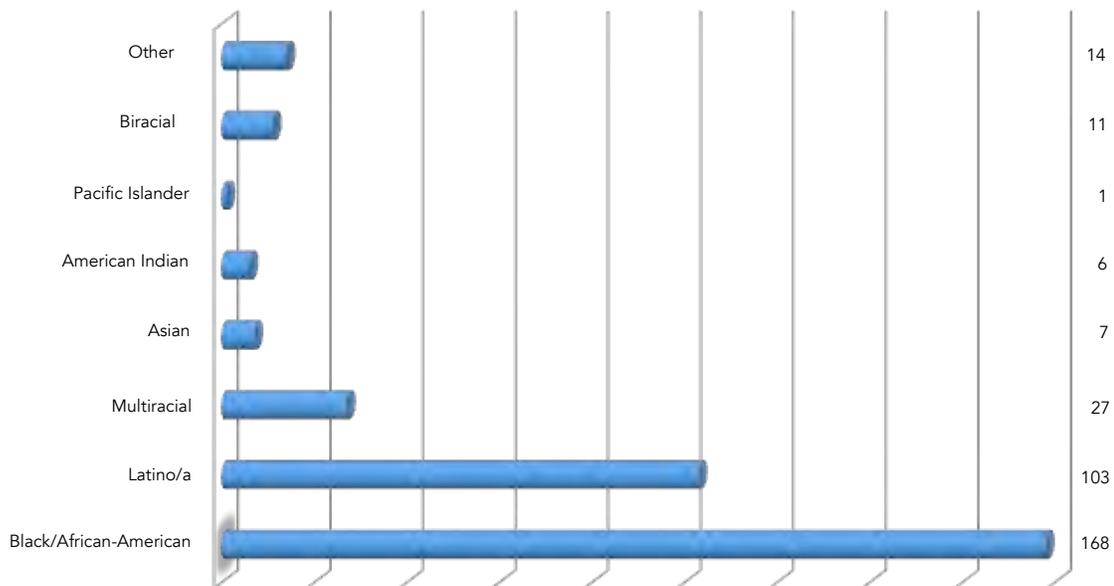
Since its inception more than two years ago, the center has trained or partnered with more than 3,000 participants from local, national and international agencies, including the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), the United Nations, the U.S. Department of State, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Introduction

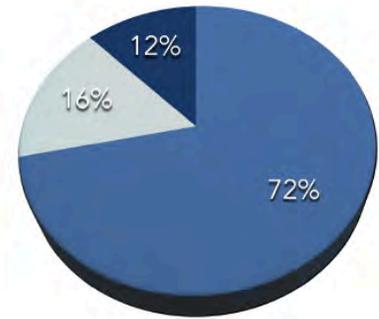
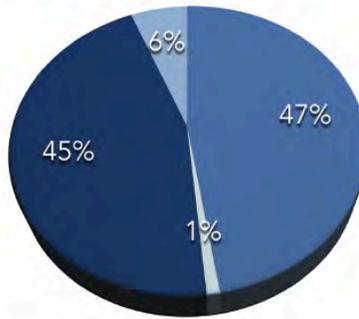
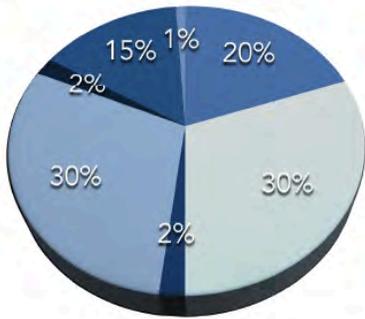
HMI operates from a core belief that all young people, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, deserve a safe and supportive environment in which to achieve their full potential. In an effort to reach this goal, HMI has developed a comprehensive array of services focused on mental health; after-school programming (in the areas of academic enrichment, arts and culture, health and wellness, and job readiness); health management and "wrap around" supportive services for more than 2,000 young people ages 13-24 annually.

Our young people are more than 90% youth of color and come from more than 350 zip codes—including every zip code in New York City, and 15 states. More than 80% are Title 1 recipients living at—or below—the federal poverty level.

Youth Demographic Profile



Youth Demographic Profile: Sexual Orientation, Gender, Age



20% Identify as Lesbian
 30% Identify as Gay
 2% Identify as Queer
 30% Identify as Bisexual
 2% Identify as Other
 15% Identify as Heterosexual
 1% Identify as Questioning

47% Identify as Male
 1% Identify as Transgender Male
 45% Identify as Female
 6% Identify as Transgender Female

72% are 16-20 years old
 16% are 21-24 years old
 12% Are 12-15 years old

It should be noted that the term "Transgender" is not widely used by the youth we serve, therefore they do not self-report as such. HMI believes that approximately 15% of our youth are somewhere along the trans-spectrum.

The following snapshot of the LGBTQ youth whom we serve reveals the depths of the struggles that our young members face.

	36% report at least one suicide attempt. 28% report suffering from depression. 19% have been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons
	More than 50% of our youth have been expelled, are overaged and/or undercredited, or are disconnected completely from school.
	40% of youth navigate marginal housing situations with 51% having experienced at least one housing crisis.
	HMI youth have HIV infection rates three times higher than the national average, mirroring the Centers for Disease Control's data on young men who have sex with men.

Living at the Intersection highlights the life stories of five New York City-based members of HMI who represent the diversity of our youth population. While we recognize that these stories represent unfinished journeys, we believe they highlight and capture the broad and interrelated range of issues these young people face on a daily basis.

The five stories in this report are told by the following LGBTQ youth:

- **Chase** is a 20 year-old African-American gay male who has been connected to HMI for four years.
- **Jessica** is a 19-year-old biracial queer trans female who has been a member of HMI for three years.
- **Eddie** is a 17-year-old African-American gay male who has been a member of HMI for less than six months.
- **Denise** is a 22 year-old self-identified queer Latina who has been a member of HMI for three years.
- **Lewis** is a 22-year-old multiracial trans male who has been a member of HMI for more than four years.

Each story presented in this report reveals how LGBTQ youth are impacted by the obstacles (disconnection from families of origin, homelessness, mental illness, unsafe educational environments, and physical and sexual assault) that they face on a daily basis, and the governmental policies, institutions, and agencies with which they intersect.

Source of Data

Living at the Intersection is based on youth narratives and data collected from HMI's comprehensive intake tool. The intake tool is an in-depth clinical assessment form that collects baseline data in many areas, including:

Demographics:

Gender and age, sexual orientation and identity, race, and ethnicity.

Living Situation:

Assessed by asking youth to list their current living situation and provide a count of the number of times they have not had a place to sleep.

Encounters with Juvenile/Criminal Justice:

A series of questions aimed at assessing youth involvement in the juvenile justice system, and any instances of criminal activity, arrests, and/or suspensions from school.

Physical Health:

Assessed by having youth list medical conditions, disabilities, STIs, and HIV status.

Mental Health:

Assessed through a series of questions examining youth engagement in self-harming behavior and any history of abuse, depression, or suicidal ideation.

Based on this assessment, youth are connected to critical services, such as individual, family or group counseling; case management; legal, medical, and housing referrals; support for homeless/street LGBTQ youth; and mental health care. Following intake, HMI works with every young person to develop individualized care-management plans that outline both long- and short-term goals. These plans are intentionally designed to develop the emotional stability and resiliency necessary to ensure a young person's overall well-being.

This report provides three types of information:

- A statistical snapshot of intake data from 375 youths captured in program year 2012-2013.
- A statistical comparison of the 2,000+ LGBTQ youths served annually at HMI.
- Stories of five youths randomly chosen to be shared in this report. Eight youth, who were interested in sharing their stories, were interviewed by HMI staff. All of the youth were asked the same questions, and their responses were recorded. These young people have been active members of HMI over periods of time ranging from six months to five years. None of their stories have been edited or changed because HMI's goal is to capture the experiences of these LGBTQ youth of color in their own words.

In Their Own Voices: **Chase**

“**Sing down**, if you do.

Dance down.

If you vogue, **vogue down**.

Yeah, just **find your outlet**, anything that will keep you from getting into that bad place in your life, you know, depression or anything like that.

And, **be safe**. Find an outlet, like anything that will keep you calm, keep you nice, you know what I’m saying?”

— Chase, 20, Male, Gay, African-American

Many LGBTQ youth face social and familial alienation. As a result of this loss, they create their own families and communities of support. Chase found the solace and support he so desperately needed outside of his birth family.

While Chase eventually developed a support system and connections to friends, he recalls the circumstances that led to him being kicked out of his home.

"I was walking around the house in a dress. It was like the uniforms—you know the dress uniforms with the blue shirt under it? Yeah, I wore that one time. My father was calling me, but my father's like a DJ, so he'd play music in the house all the time, and I didn't hear him. I was upstairs in my room twirling around in the dress, and my father walked in on me. It was a big thing after, but, you know, after he screamed at me, I was like, I'm gonna do it again. I waited the next day till he left to go to work, and I put it on again.

"I was living two lives, basically. My parents are Christians. So, when I was home, I had to keep it calm. I had to be quiet at home. I wasn't like 'out there.' Bu, when I got to school I just felt more comfortable, you know, just being me, just being around my circle. You know, being around my boyfriend. At the time, I was just living like a double life. You know what I mean? I couldn't basically be who I wanted to be at home, so when I got to school I knew that was like my comfort zone at that time."

Chase remains resilient despite the various forms of disconnection he has experienced. He disclosed his sexual identity, with the help of schoolmates and staff, when he was a freshman in high school. Around the same time, he also began publicly dating his first boyfriend.

But unlike most adolescents who are able to share stories about high school "crushes" with family, Chase was forced to lead a double life—"out and proud" in public and secretive, fearful, and ashamed at home. When he began to express his authentic self at home, Chase was kicked out.

"One time I was practicing a production for a ball, and my mom said to be home by nine o'clock, and I honestly totally forgot about the time. It was like ten, and I was in Harlem, and I live all the way on the borderline of Queens and Brooklyn. It took me like an hour and a half to get home. I didn't get home until like 11:30. I knew my mother was up and my father was upstairs sleeping, because their room was dark, but all the lights were on, even my bedroom light. I was like, 'Yeah, this is going to be a problem.' Once I unlocked the first door, and I pushed the other door, boom, the chain was on it, and my mother was like, 'Throw the key in and get out.' And that was me moving out."

He continues:

"I'm telling you. My whole homeless situation, that whole challenge, it was hard. It's very hard to cope with. It was just a lot. I was basically going house to house, couch hopping. That was one thing I had to overcome. I also had to overcome just being able to love myself and not look for love in other places.

"I've sacrificed a lot. I haven't been to a lot of family events. Like, my cousin died. I wasn't able to go to the funeral because I didn't have church clothes anymore. I kept my regular clothes and I left my church clothes there. I didn't have time to go back to my parents' house, get clothes, and go. So that was a hard thing. And then, another thing is not being able to spend time with my family, like go to BBQs and stuff like that. Those are the things that I had to sacrifice in order to not put me in that bad mood that I was in when I was a young little boy. I'd rather sacrifice those things in order to just be happy, you know?"

Homelessness within the LGBTQ community continues to be at crisis levels and the inadequate systemic response has fueled the number of young people who continue to be homeless.

In New York City there are fewer than 500 youth shelter beds, while some estimates indicate that upward of 3,800 LGBTQ youths are in need of shelter on any given night.

HMI has seen an increase in youth like Chase, presenting with an immediate housing crisis or dealing with ongoing housing instability:

- **20% (n out of 75)** of youth accessing HMI identified housing as a need at point of intake

Looking further at this baseline demographic information:

- **51% (n out of 91)** of youth members at HMI report having to find a place to sleep at least once
- **33% (n out of 123)** of youth reported having to find sleep more than three times

Fortunately, Chase was able to build a new family, or what he calls his “gay family,” through HMI and his connection to the ballroom scene.

“Gay families—my gay family is always on top of me, and I love that about them. They're always on top of me to be focused. They're always on top of me to basically be successful. That's one thing I love about them. They're very, very family-oriented. Things that I could not talk to my family [of origin] about, I can talk to them about. I can't go to my family and talk to them about situations that happen in my life, because at the end of the day, they don't understand and they never experienced any of it, so being able to go to my house members, to go to my gay mother or my gay father, and they're telling me how to do things and they're very hands-on about me going in the right path and not slipping up. And if I do make a mistake or I do slip up, you know, the older kids will comfort me and tell me it's “Okay. It's just a mistake. It's fine.”

Chase also attributes joining HMI at 16 to helping him overcome his feelings of being alone with no support.

“You know, coming to HMI and being able to vogue and learn, that just took my mind off of those bad things that were being said. So, just me learning how to vogue and me learning how to “do face” and just getting into what the ballroom scene really is, it basically took my mind off of, like, all the bad things.”

For many LGBTQ youth of color, the ballroom community—a creative collective and kinship system established by African-American and Latino/a LGBTQ individuals, provided family, community, and a home. The “houses” that curate balls have saved the lives of many LGBTQ people of color who have been displaced from homes and disconnected from their biological families.

Chase connects his progress to a network of family he created in and outside of the Ballroom community.

“I have friends outside of the gay scene that I also talk to. Like I said, I'm a church boy, so, like when I go to church, friends at church, you know, we'll talk, we'll pray and do stuff like that. And, they will help me, too. They'll help me as far as jobs and housing and stuff like that. I had a lot of supporters from everywhere.

“I just love being—just love being, you know, very happy.”

While Chase was able to create a family system that enables him to achieve self-acceptance and support, HMI understands and recognizes that families of origin are systems of care that remain equally vital in the lives of LGBTQ youth of color.

In Their Own Voices: *Jessica & Eddie*

“My **friends**, that’s about it, yeah.
I don’t have any other real **emotional support**.”

—Jessica, 19, Trans Female, Queer, Multiracial
 (“mixed”)

“Without my **best friend**, I would not get anything that I need to
accomplish done. Like, looking for a job ...
or even **getting my medical insurance back on track**.”

—Eddie, 17, Male, Gay, African-American

Friends are often vital sources of support in the lives of LGBTQ youth of color. The connection to a caring peer is sometimes the only way a young person receives the support, acceptance, and resources they need. Jessica and Eddie have limited family support, but their connections to positive peer networks and organizations like HMI have been essential to their development and survival.

Jessica has been living on her own for the past three years. She recalls the event that resulted in her need to couch surf (sleeping on couches in different, sometimes, unsafe, conditions).

“So, my dad took me away from my mom (as a young child). When I turned 16, I came back here to live with my mom. Then we had a big fight and she kicked me out. I couldn't finish school because of that, and I was so close to finishing. I finished all my credits. I just needed three regents, but I couldn't go because she kicked me out, and I didn't have a MetroCard to go to school.”

Eddie still lives at home with his family and is enrolled in school, but he is impacted by the set of challenges his family is presently facing—challenges that have ultimately resulted in him having to manage his needs on his own. His mother, whom he deeply cares about, is disabled. He and his siblings have committed a lot of time ensuring she is well cared for.

“A sick patient had pushed her out the window in 2008. It shook her brain and she had brain damage. Like, it just shook her brain, and she lost memory—short-term memory. Yeah, she been in and out the hospital, but, you know, nothing is helping her. We're thinking about putting her back in the hospital.”

Despite the fact that Eddie lives at home, he struggles with the various family members who are antagonistic to LGBTQ people.

“I was still in the closet till 14. My family is just very judgmental. They didn't like gay people because it would give our family a bad reputation. Even though I'm gay, my cousin is gay, too, but he didn't let them know until they really found out about him.”

According to Reardon (2009), lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who reported high levels of family rejection during adolescence were:

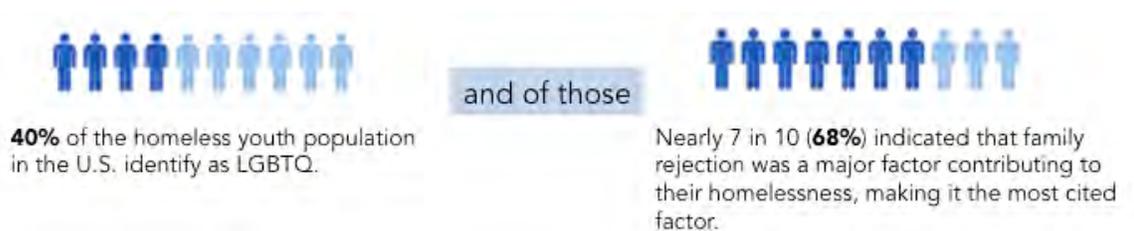
8.4x	more likely to	report having attempted suicide
5.9x		report high levels of depression
3.4x		use drugs
3.4x		report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse

compared with peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection.

Family rejection is an experience Jessica and Eddie share. In fact, a great number of youth participating in programming at HMI are not “out” to their families, guardians, friends, or other people in their lives for fear of being rejected by family and caretakers and evicted from their homes. HMI's intake data reveals that 27% of youth do not want HMI to contact them at home for fear of “outing” them.

HMI pays a great deal of attention to this issue because we understand that disclosure of sexual and gender identity for a young person can have negative repercussions, as in the case of four out of the five youths interviewed for this report.

According to the Williams Institute (2012), nationally, aside from poverty, family rejection because of LGBTQ identity is the number one reason for youth homelessness.



Additionally, according to the National Center for Transgender Equality (2015), “One in five transgender people in the United States have been discriminated when seeking a home, and more than one in ten have been evicted from their homes because of their gender identity.”

Jessica shared her thoughts regarding the many ways family rejection hurts young LGBTQ people.

“Youths’ parents are not being supportive enough and parents whose first action is just, ‘Oh, leave the house and don’t come back.’ Parents don’t understand LGBTQ youth and why they identify with what they identify with, you know?”

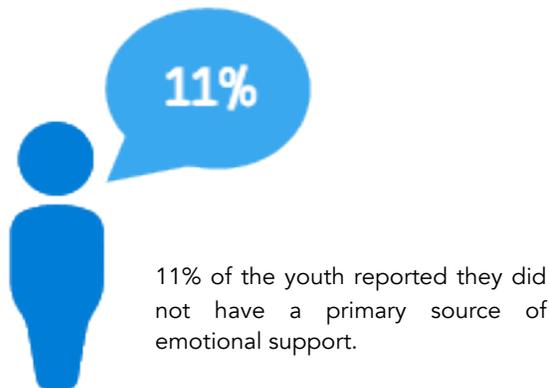
LGBTQ youth benefit greatly from the presence of loving parents, caregivers, and friends. For example, Jessica's relationship with her mother was strained, but she also felt affirmed by her father. While the lack of support can be detrimental to LGBTQ youth, the presence of loving and affirming family members can be lifesaving.

“Sometimes I feel because I’m a trans woman, this is why I’m going through all of this. Yeah, I feel like it’s that. My dad, he’s supportive of me and everything I have been doing in my life. Sometimes, it really depends on the parent to me, because I know some of my lesbian friends, they still live at home, but then some of them don’t. Some of my gay friends, gay male friends, they live at home, and then some don’t. Some of my trans friends still live with their parents and some don’t.”

Eddie has had a similar experience with his family but is grateful to his best friend who helped him accept his identity and begin to accept himself.

"My best friend, she took me out the 'closet," and, I was like, you know what? She's right. I don't care what anybody says. I'm gay and I'm proud. I'm gonna come out the closet, and I don't care because at the end of the day there's people all over the world that's gay on the low, for real. And there's nothing to be ashamed of because being gay is probably the proudest thing you would ever imagine."

According to HMI intake data,



However, it is important to note that a significant number of these youth, often name HMI staff, friends, and peer networks, as opposed to family members, as primary sources of support.

Although it may seem contradictory to our mission, we do not encourage young people to "come out."

Instead, HMI works with our youth to develop safety plans in order to ensure they are safe when they choose to "come out." According to Rotheram-Borus and Langabeer (2001), LGBTQ adolescents face additional challenges, such as physical and verbal abuse, because they are in the midst of developing personal and social identities, have fewer coping mechanisms, and lack the independent resources and educational status that adults have. Encouraging a youth to disclose when they may not have the resources to support this process would be irresponsible.

"Coming out" requires that youth understand that some people and institutions with which they interact, may have negative responses to their disclosure and may place them at risk for negative reactions, including violent responses. It also means an organization must be ready to provide critical services, such as connectivity to shelter and other systems.

Eddie, who had been a member of HMI for a few months at the time of the interview, and Jessica, who has been a member for about three years, spoke poignantly about the need for affirming and supportive people and networks in the lives of LGBTQ youth. They were also clear about the obstacles they faced in other areas of their lives.

Jessica details the difficulties she has faced in securing and keeping employment.

"Okay. So my last job, I was an office assistant at a college in Manhattan. I was working there for two months, and there was an employee who was harassing me. Countless times, I told my supervisor what was going on, and they had said they were going to write it up or note it. And I came to work one day, and I was like already mad, and my coworker was bothering me and I flipped out on them. So, I got fired. But come to find out the other employee didn't get fired. So I filed a lawsuit against them, and that's currently going on."

Unfortunately, Jessica's story is not unusual. According to the Human Right's Campaign (2015), there is no federal law that consistently protects LGBT individuals from employment discrimination, and 29 states do not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Eddie also talked about his feeling unsafe when he is not in his own neighborhood or at HMI.

"Oh, if I'm in a different hood, I feel like, 'Eh, I should not be here.' I feel like something bad is gonna happen. I feel it. Most of my friends, they have a lot of depression and they've been abused a lot, so they try to cope with it, but sometimes it really doesn't work. So I feel like HMI helped me with that, too, because I was depressed a lot."

Depression and other mental health challenges continue to be at crisis levels for LGBTQ youth, especially youth of color, which is reflected in mental health data collected during HMI's intake process:

19%	have been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons
28%	have considered suicide
24%	report suffering from depression
19%	report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse
36%	report at least one suicide attempt

In Their Own Voices: **Denise**

"I am my own hero because I can better myself
in ways that **other people can't better me.**"

—Denise, 22, Female, Queer, Latina

Denise grew up on Staten Island with her mother and father. Like many adolescents who often discover and rediscover their identities as they continue to mature, Denise first identified as heterosexual and then bisexual before self-identifying as a queer woman of color.

"As a kid, I used to wear baggy clothes, and I don't know if that's what made me feel like I was different, but I felt different as a kid."

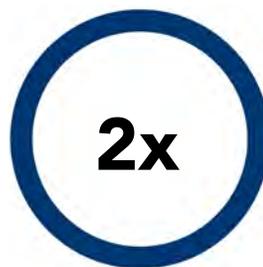
Denise's choice to wear clothes in a manner typically associated with boys resulted in her being ridiculed as a child, and questioned about her sexual orientation. She remembers peers harassing her about identifying as bisexual.

"And people were just like, 'You can't be bisexual. You have to pick. You're either straight or gay.' And I'm just like, 'Why is it that I have to pick? Why is it that I just can't be who I am?'"

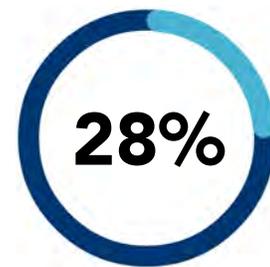
When young LGBTQ people, like Denise, are constantly on the defensive in expectation of being ridiculed or in fear about potential physical attacks, the educational process is compromised, hindered, or halted altogether. Key rites of passage, like attending one's prom, or achieving significant educational milestones are delayed or missed. [According to *Growing up LGBTQ in America* \(2012\)](#)



92% of LGBTQ youth say they hear negative messages about being LGBTQ. The top sources are school, the Internet, and their peers.



LGBTQ youth are 2x as likely as their peers to say they have been physically assaulted, kicked, or shoved at their school.



28% of LGBTQ youth say their biggest problems are not being accepted by their family, having trouble at school or with bullying, being afraid of being out/open.

LGBTQ youth report that suspensions often occur after they have defended themselves from harassment. The majority of the young people interviewed for this report shared that their schools did not respond to reports of bullying, leaving them to address these situations on their own. Of the 2,000+ youth at HMI, 35% completing an intake report being suspended or expelled from school. Feeling victimized by their peers and often blamed for the situation by the adults charged with their safety, these youth often resort to violence for survival or protection.

Given the often hostile and unwelcoming environment that many LGBTQ students encounter, it is no surprise that 13% of youth completing intake at HMI have dropped out of school. Feeling safe in a school is paramount to being mentally, emotionally, and physically stable, which in turn allows a young person to obtain their education—a huge precursor to future success as an adult.

While many young girls of color fight through multiple forms of marginalization because of their race and gender, many lesbian, bisexual and trans girls of color must also contend with homophobia and trans-misogyny within and outside of school settings. The multiple systemic barriers often lead to a myriad of challenges that ultimately lead to major trauma experienced by the young person, thus impeding their overall adolescent development.

"I faced people being racist against me for being a queer woman of color, and for being queer in general."

Like many of the youth that HMI serves, Denise struggles with simultaneous oppressions, not just antagonism because of her sexual orientation. She describes becoming homeless after being sexually assaulted.

"I became homeless when I got raped. And I didn't feel comfortable being in my parents' house. I actually never felt comfortable being in my parents' house when I started figuring out who I really was, at the age of, like, 11, 12. From then, I didn't really feel comfortable. I didn't feel welcomed as much."

"I'm young. I'm 17. I'm still like a kid, a teenager. All I know is that I was abused by some man, and my parents are not understanding. I didn't feel comfortable. And, this one day, I came home after being raped, and my dad was like, 'Where were you? Where were you? Why is it that you come home at like seven o'clock at night, and you were supposed to be home like four-thirty, five o'clock?' He was like, 'Your school is right up the block, literally two blocks away. Why is it that it took you so long?' And for them doing that, that's why I never told them I was raped."

Youth who feel safe in schools are more likely to graduate from high school, affording them a chance at a better future. Denise was sexually assaulted in her school. She had no support system. Research shows that LGBTQ youth of color, like Denise, are disproportionately impacted by severe forms of violence. According to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (2013), transgender women, people of color, and gay men face the most severe violence.

Soon after Denise was sexually assaulted, she left her home holding onto a painful secret that she was afraid to disclose. Not feeling as if she was accepted or understood by her parents, she initially moved in with an aunt but would soon move between four shelters in NYC.

"She put me in a shelter, and then that's how I went from shelter to shelter, and that's how I met so many people I know now that's like my closest friends."

Between the ages of 17 and 20, Denise was without a stable and consistent home.

"You're gonna—you're gonna feel like you're not welcome in places and, like, when you're homeless, that's what you feel like. You feel like you're not welcome. You feel like you're not safe. You don't have a place. When I was homeless, I never said I was homeless. I said I was lease-less, because—meaning I didn't have a home, but I felt welcome in certain places. I just didn't have a roof over my head. I didn't have a lease. So, I'm not homeless. I'm lease-less."

Denise now has an apartment she describes as "small, cluttered, but safe," but she still has to manage financial struggles.

"Well, when I got EBT [EBT, "electronic benefits transfer," is used by New York State for the SNAP program—and is also known as food stamps] I got that in like 2010, 2011, and I've been on it for like five years now. And, when I was on it, I was 17. And from 17 to 20, they didn't give me no problems. They just left me alone. I was in school. They told me to just bring a letter saying I was in school. But, when you turn 21, that's when they don't want you on it. They want to start kicking you off, like, OK, you're an adult now, you should know how to support yourself, when it's not that easy, especially in New York."

Like many young people between the ages of 18 and 21, Denise faces many institutional challenges, including access to viable employment. Denise thinks that these issues are exacerbated by her being a queer woman of color.

"I feel like just being queer is an issue or a problem because people are not going to understand me. I say, 'I'm a queer woman of color—like, if I go to a job interview, right, and they say 'female,' I don't put 'female' or 'male.' I just put on the other side—I put a box, and I say 'other,' and I write 'other' on the job. Most of the time, that's why I don't get jobs, and I don't care because if you're not going to give me a job just because of that, there's a problem right there. So being queer is a problem."

Denise is not unlike many of the youth at HMI, who come in need of emergency services and support but discover HMI as a safe space to build long-lasting relationships with staff and peers, as well as a hub for resources and access to programs that help them move from crisis to stability.

"When I came, I came mostly for crisis needs—that's the pantry, food, shower, clothes, stuff like that. Then I started getting into the studio and doing multiple internships: photography, Women Speak, HYA [Hetrick-Martin Youth Advocates], Job Readiness, other things like that. And each year there was a different thing I started off with. I started off in crisis, then I started doing therapy, then doing internships."

In Their Own Voices: **Lewis**

"I don't see being trans as becoming **one thing or the other**.
I feel like **I've always been who I am**.

"It's other people's lens of me that's changed. And that's really weird, because physically, like, **I'm the same person**."

– Lewis, 22, Male, Transgender, Multiracial

Lewis is a self-described multiracial, pansexual, transgender male from Queens, New York who knows what it is like to exist within an intersection where all of his various identities subject him to multiple levels of discrimination and pain.

"I feel like there's a lot of places that I haven't fit in because I'm always like in between these different categories. So, like with gender and with race and stuff, I guess there's kind of a feeling of isolation."

It was because of the isolation that Lewis experienced in high school and challenges he confronted during his first year of college that he decided to become an HMI member. That was five years ago. He was 17 and fully aware that there existed few spaces where he could be his authentic self.

"It was really hard because there were some teachers who were supportive, but they weren't allowed to be openly supportive of me. We would hear stories about an active, like, queer and trans 'witch hunt' going on, and one person had to meet with the principal every week to try to turn her from bi to straight, and a lot of people were singled out in that way, including another trans man who I was dating. So, neither of us could really be out about our gender. It was really depressing."

High school presented Lewis with its own set of unique challenges, all of which are similar to the experiences often reported by LGBTQ and gender nonconforming youth across the country. Before and after school, Lewis interacted with a range of family and strangers—some were affirming and others were not.

"My relationship with my mom is mostly OK. It took her a long time to be OK with me being trans. When I first started coming out about it, she sort of found out by accident because she saw something that I had written down. I was like 15. She told me that this is happening to me because I hated Jesus, and I didn't even know what that meant."

Religion is a theme that was woven throughout Lewis's personal narrative. Lewis spoke poignantly and painfully about the ways some family members and teachers used religious belief as a tool to dismiss and degrade him.

"It was weird because my grandma was a lot more accepting of me, and my grandma's the one, you know, who came here straight from Colombia and is older and this, that, and the third. But she never told me what her issues were directly. It was my mom who always brought up religion. She'll still ask me questions sometimes, like, 'Who put this in your head?' But most of the time, she'll leave it alone. She's trying. It took my mom like two years to stop with the whole 'You hate Jesus' thing."

Since graduating from an all-girls Catholic high school, where he was bullied, Lewis has found spaces that are affirming of his transgender identity.

“Once I graduated, I never wanted to feel the way I felt in school again. I felt like I finally had the freedom in college to explore a community.”

Since 2000, the number of college students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) has roughly doubled. A fall 2012 nationwide survey of 90,000 students by the American College Health Association (ACHA) found:

8.4%	identified as gay/lesbian
2.6%	identified as bisexual
3.8%	identified as unsure

The percentage of students who identified as transgender similarly doubled from 0.1% in spring 2000 to 0.2% in fall 2012.

During his first year of college, Lewis acknowledged a newfound sense of freedom and connection to a vast community of support. Most importantly, he was finally able to secure the help necessary to begin “T,” his colloquial reference for the prescription of testosterone he now takes as part of his hormone replacement therapy.

“So I knew that I wanted to go on hormones, but I finally had the chance, you know, coming to the city where all these resources were because I’m from Queens. It didn’t seem like there was much that I could do there. So going to school in Manhattan meant that there was a lot more available to me.”

Going to school in Manhattan did not stop the verbal harassment he experienced on and off campus.

“Definitely I had people scream things at me and my partner, you know, like, ‘Who’s the man? Who’s the woman?’ Now that I’ve been on T longer, I don’t get like a lot of anti-lesbian things, but I get a lot of anti-gay male things. So I’ll be walking down the street, and somebody will call me and my friends ‘faggots.’”

Like many transgender and/or gender nonconforming youth, public spaces like bathrooms and streets can be dangerous. But often private, seemingly protected spaces can be similarly treacherous for LGBTQ or gender nonconforming youth.

"We were walking a friend outside of the campus to try to find her boyfriend, and this one safety officer asked us if we were looking for someone and said he was inside. So we go inside – he sent us to the basement where security is. And, at this point, it's like four in the morning and the one officer called me and my partner 'ladies,' and I corrected him, and he, like, kind of mocked me. We went downstairs, and the public safety sergeant locked us in the room and called a bunch of other public safety people in because the one girl was getting upset because she just wanted to go home. He asked us for our IDs, and I was trying to explain to him the name on my ID is not the name that I use, and he didn't get it. He was laughing at me. He asked if this person was my girlfriend and, like, all these really inappropriate questions."

Lewis's experiences are indicative of the myriad shapes that violence takes in the lives of many transgender and or gender nonconforming youth. Physical and verbal violence is one example, but isolation from institutional support is another.

"As someone who has these issues with mental health and does not have stable housing, it's actually terrifying. There's all these things that pile up on each other. It's been an issue for me to stay in school. I dropped out of college because I just had too much going on in my life, and I couldn't really afford it because of issues with financial aid."

"The first place I stayed when I was homeless was with a volunteer at a bookstore where I used to be staff. Her lease was running out. She had two weeks left, so she let me stay in her room for two weeks with some other people who were volunteering in the store. They let me have their food and stuff. It was just really amazing. I also had people in the Queer Student Union at the college I went to. Some of the people from those organizations raised money so I could buy food. It was a lot. Like, I didn't realize how many people had my back because everybody's going through things themselves. But you know, they did as much as they could and that meant a lot."

Mental health disparities among LGBTQ youth continue to persist and tend to be exacerbated, as was the case with Lewis, by various structural issues, like the lack of familial support, disconnection from communities of care, lack of access to institutional support and services, etc.

Creating Systemic Change

Chase, Jessica, Eddie, Denise, and Lewis provide a glimpse into the lives of young LGBTQ youth of color living in New York City. Their stories have a common thread—the multiplicity of challenges they face, and the omnipresence of those challenges. These young people struggle with poverty, abandonment, homelessness, displacement, marginalization, violence, and racism, as well as obstacles stemming from their sexual orientation or gender identification. They encounter these challenges everywhere they go—at home, in shelters, in educational institutions, in healthcare facilities, in their neighborhoods, at work, and on the streets.

With over three decades providing comprehensive services to LGBTQ youth of color, HMI understands that these young people intersect with many systems and institutions beyond our organization and that these young people are in urgent need of appropriate and equitable care. With the goal of achieving systemic policy and programmatic change throughout public systems that are charged with the care and well-being of LGBTQ youth, HMI has developed a best-practice Five-Point Assessment and Implementation Tool, HMI's Five-Point PRYSM (**P**otential **R**ealization for **Y**outh **S**ervice **M**odels) Scan, designed to foster more supportive, inclusive, and safe environments for LGBTQ youth.

Utilizing the systems and structures developed for our best-practice mental health and after-school services over the past three decades, HMI's Five-Point PRYSM Scan evaluates policies and practices within an organization, then provides effective program designs and infrastructure guidelines needed to produce responsive environments.

The Scan uses five key metric areas for assessments: Policies and Procedures, Practices, Physical Environments, Programs, and Professional Development. On the basis of our experiential history of direct service with LGBTQ youth, we know that the most successful safety nets or systems in which LGBTQ youth thrive each has these principles prominently in place:

- **Policies and Procedures:** inclusive, comprehensive policies ensuring there is institutional guidance necessary to support LGBTQ youth. Policies must detail safety measures, plans for staff development, funds to meet the community's needs, structural expectations, etc.

- Practices: clear investment in social-cultural practices inclusive of and nurturing to LGBTQ youth. This should be done with the understanding that trauma-informed counseling practices, as opposed to reparative or conversion therapy, are ideal for the adolescent development of LGBTQ youth.
- Physical Environments: a physical environment that reflects diversity and is inclusive of LGBTQ young people. The environment must be accessible and safe for all youth.
- Programs: implementation of programs that specifically address the needs of LGBTQ youth. These must encourage growth and appropriate adolescent development.
- Professional Development: Because an organization or institution is only as capable and competent as the individuals it employs, there must be an active and conscious ongoing commitment to ensuring that staff, volunteers, and the greater community of individuals providing support for LGBTQ young people are trained and proficient in healthy LGBTQ adolescent development.

The Scan’s objectives include:

1	Ensuring agency policies are designed to provide institution-wide guidance regarding the structures and expected community behaviors necessary to support LGBTQ youth.
2	Adopting social-cultural practices that are inclusive and nurturing to LGBTQ youth.
3	Fostering a physical environment that reflects and is inclusive of diversity at-large, while ensuring that the physical environment is accessible and safe for all youth.
4	Implementing programs that both address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ youth and are designed to encourage growth and appropriate adolescent development.
5	Providing professional development that builds the agency’s and staff’s ability to serve LGBTQ youth in appropriate and culturally fluent ways.

Upon completion of the scan, programs receive from HMI a comprehensive report on each area, noting strengths, challenges, and opportunities for growth. Additionally, the resulting report details specific steps, trainings, and interventions the agency can implement to expand its proficiency in the delivery of services to LGBTQ young people.

Versions of HMI's Five-Point PRYSM Scan have been adapted for the Centers for Disease Control's Division of Adolescent Health (DASH) and were implemented at DASH-funded schools within the Broward County, Florida, school district and have undergone multiple levels of clearance throughout the federal system, including approval by an internal review board.

HMI has partnered with the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) to work with the department's funded sites that provide runaway and homeless youth services. Using HMI's Five-Point PRYSM Scan, HMI addresses the safety and well-being of LGBTQ young people who access DYCD's services. The goal is to ensure these organizations are providing, or are moving toward, the creation of safer and more supportive environments for LGBTQ youth.

HMI expects to expand this intervention to other organizations and institutions including police and school safety departments, departments of education, departments of health, departments of homeless services and youth service providers, in an effort to better serve the needs of disenfranchised youth of color in effective, culturally competent ways.

Conclusion

HMI offers *Living at the Intersection* in the hope of deepening the understanding of LGBTQ youth of color and the multiple, interconnected challenges they endure. The stories of these five young people speak to the severity of the issues they face in every aspect of their lives. The reality of their circumstances demands that appropriate and effective interventions, strategies, and policies be developed to address the health, education, and safety of these youth.

Over the past three decades serving LGBTQ youth—like the five who bravely shared their stories in this report—HMI has developed and implemented innovative programs and structures that successfully address the complex crises impacting LGBTQ youth of color. The organization is proud to be taking this expertise beyond our doors and the 2,000+ youth we serve each year.

With the development and implementation of HMI's Five-Point PRYSM Scan, HMI hopes to impact the complex and interwoven systems that LGBTQ youth interface with on a daily basis. Our goal is to strengthen and support the safety net of organizations and institutions to better serve LGBTQ young people.

We are grateful to our LGBTQ young people for sharing their stories, and we are proud to add *Living at the Intersection* as a resource for those striving to create safer, inclusive, and life-affirming programs and organizations for LGBTQ youth.

References

American College Health Association. (2000). *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment: Reference group executive summary spring 2000*. Hanover, MD: American College Health Association.

American College Health Association. (2012). *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Reference group executive summary fall 2012*. Hanover, MD: American College Health Association.

Growing up LGBTQ in America (2012). In Human Rights Campaign-Children and Youth. Retrieved October 7, 2015.

Human Rights Campaign. (2015). Employment non-discrimination act. Retrieved from <http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/employment-non-discrimination-act>

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Bartkiewicz, M. J., Boesen, M. J., & Palmer, N. A. (2012). *2011 national school climate survey report* (p. 39). New York, NY: Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network.

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Palmer, N. A., & Boesen, M. J. (2014). *The 2013 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York, NY: Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network.

National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs. (2014). *National report on hate violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and HIV-affected communities released today* [Press release]. Retrieved from

http://www.avp.org/storage/documents/2013_mr_ncavp_hvreport.pdf

National Center for Transgender Equality. (n.d.). *Housing & homelessness*. Retrieved from <http://transequality.org/issues/housing-homelessness>

Reardon, C. (2009). Family acceptance project—Helping LGBTQ youths. *Social Work Today*, 9(6), 6. Retrieved from <http://www.socialworktoday.com>

Rotheram-Borus, M. J., & Langabeer, K. A. (2001). Developmental trajectories of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. In D'Augelli, A., & Patterson, C. (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities and youth: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 97–128). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sears, B., & Badgett, L. (2012, June). Beyond Stereotypes:Poverty in the LGBTQ Community . In the Williams Institute. Retrieved from <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/headlines/beyond-stereotypes-poverty-in-the-lgbt-community/>

For further information regarding this report please contact info@hmi.org

Acknowledgements

The Hetrick-Martin Institute would like to acknowledge the following for their help in the preparation of this report:

Tommy Bricco
Jennifer Cox
Brian Dauth
Soraya Elcock
Darnell Moore
Lyndi Oxoby
Lillian Rivera
Ross Schwartz



HETRICK-MARTIN INSTITUTE

2 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003