

I seem normal right? I am student I work hard and receive amazing grades in return. I am a daughter, a sister, a granddaughter. But guess what? I am a part of a few minority groups. I know surprising right. Many of you could probably guess the obvious one, yes, I am a female. But, would you walk up to me and automatically profile me as a lesbian? Well, surprise! I am gay and extremely proud of it. I have a coming out story, just like everyone else. It goes like this: At the age of just fourteen years old, I made the brave decision of coming out to my family. On the morning of November 2, 2014, I woke up and said to myself, "This is it. I am going to tell my family that I like girls." It seemed like a simple task. But boy, did I underestimate the emotional toll and roller coaster of a day that it would become. I started the day by telling my younger brother whose reaction was "Yes and?" So, I thought okay maybe this will not be as bad as I thought. I asked my grandparents to come into my room. I told them, and they answered, "We just want you to be happy and loved." Two for two, with some tears of course. The day was going pretty well. Now the last step: tell my parents. I walked downstairs sat on the couch and said, "Mom, dad, the rumors at school are right. I am gay." Before they could even answer I was in tears and running upstairs. I locked myself in the bathroom and took a shower. I went back downstairs afterwards and prepared for the worst. But actually, they were both super supportive even though they did not fully understand what was going on. Meaning that they did not understand how I came to this revelation. To be honest, I did not really have any answers for them. As the years went on, I had one foot out of the closet and one deep in the closet. My senior year of high school, I took a leap of faith and jumped completely out of the closet. I am never going back. Being out is so liberating.

You might be asking yourself right about now, "What does your coming out story have to do with any of this?" What it does tells you is that I am a lot luckier than most LGBTQIAP+

youth to have a supportive, loving family. Some of my friends' stories are not nearly as hopeful as mine was. Due to this heartbreaking fact, I am spending my time as an undergraduate taking courses that will allow me to understand the sociology of various identities, how to help LGBTQIAP+ youth using multitudes of techniques and approaches, the complexities of the political, judicial, and societal systems pertaining to laws, regulations, and norms that relate and effect the LGBTQIAP+ community. By learning, analyzing, and processing this information, I will be able to make a direct connection to how geographic location and religion effect the LGBTQIAP+ population. Once I know the answers to these inquiries, I will be able to help youth after they are displaced, whether that be because of running away or being thrown out.

I know for a fact that there are way too many LGBTQIAP+ youth on the streets, in foster care, and incarcerated. Here is the sad truth. Approximately 20-40% of youth experiencing homelessness identify with the LGBTQIAP+ community. The number varies based on geographic location for example, suburban, urban, and rural and religious ideals. Why are the numbers so high? Well, simply put parents or guardians throw out their children come out or the children run away in anticipation or as a result of a bad reaction. As a result, many youth end up on the streets. Specifically, about 47% of youth that are homeless after being kicked out or running away fall under the LGBTQIAP+ umbrella. Additionally, LGBTQIAP+ youth make up about 20% of the juvenile justice system. Why? Because, believe it or not, running away as a minor is in fact a crime. Approximately 28% of youth detained after running away are LGBTQIAP+. While it may not seem lucky, some youth go into the foster care system avoiding homelessness or incarceration. However, LGBTQIAP+ youth are extremely overrepresented in the foster care system. According to the Human Rights Campaign, "nearly 1 out of 5 (19.1%) LA-based foster youth are LGBTQ and the percentage of youth in foster care who are LGBTQ is

between 1.5 and 2 times that of youth living outside of foster care. More specifically, the research found that there are 13.6% LGBTQ-identified youth in foster care compared to 7.2% in the general youth population, and 5.6% transgender youth in foster care compared to 2.25% in the general youth population.” There are many instances in which youth are failed. For example, after rejection from their birth family youth can be faced with sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. Additionally, they can face rejection time and time again as a result of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

But I am not here to tell you that the system is broken. Because it is not. It works for who it is intended for and the systems are not intended to assist minority groups like the LGBTQIAP+ community. I am here to explain to you that LGBTQIAP+ youth need our help. Based on where they grow up geographically, what religion their family practices, and how their parents or guardians were raised significantly impacts these statistics.

Stereotypically, the further south, increasingly conservative, and/or religious an area tends to be the more rejection youth of the LGBTQIAP+ population may face. While there may be some outliers and exceptions to the level of acceptance, most people living in those areas do not support the LGBTQIAP+ community. That being said, many youth may decide not to come out in fear of being rejected. Additionally, this is also the area where many youth decide to run away or become homeless as a result of coming out or being outed.

I am not here to tell you that everyone should share my opinion that LGBTQIAP+ youth are normal people and are no different from straight, gender conforming youth. I understand that there are many people who do not share my opinion and believe the opposite. Acknowledging that there are varying opinions, I ask people to ask themselves this: Did you love your child before they came out? Have they done anything to physically harm you or anyone else? Think

about how much trauma you could potentially put your child through by rejecting them and kicking them out? By just asking a few questions and reciprocating love instead of hate and ignorance, the statistics for LGBTQIAP+ youth homelessness and incarceration may start to decline.

I understand this cannot be done overnight. I also recognize that I cannot do this alone. So I am asking you, the next time you see a youth on the street, show them love. There is more to their story. The next time you see a youth on the street, offer to buy them a meal because you never know the last time they ate was. The next time you encounter anyone, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, spread compassion, kindness, and love. To LGBTQIAP+ youth, keep fighting, I know it may seem like the light is not there anymore and you feel like giving up, but your story is not over.