

LGBTQ Youth Homelessness:
Annual Report on Youth Homelessness
in Whatcom County

Conducted July 2015

Northwest Youth Services

Queer Youth Project



About Us

Northwest Youth Services (NYWS) collaborates with at-risk, runaway, and homeless youth to foster self-reliance. Throughout the years, NWYS has specialized in helping youth who have been marginalized by their choices or simply because of who they are. We believe in the inherent dignity of each young person we serve. The Queer Youth Project, a program within Northwest Youth Services, serves lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) at-risk, runaway, and homeless youth and works within the community to create a more equitable and welcoming environment for this marginalized population.

Acknowledgments

Conducting a Point-in-Time Count is a team effort. This year's successful Youth Point-in-Time Count (YPITC) was made possible by the commitment and collaboration of Northwest Youth Services' employees and volunteers. The community partners that took part in this Count were equally important to its success. Thank you to everyone who participated in this year's efforts.

Another acknowledgment is owed to the 124 participants who responded to the survey and provided valuable data. Without this information, Northwest Youth Services would not know about the complexities of homelessness in Whatcom County and how best to respond to the needs of our community's young people. Thank you.

For more information about this report, the 2015 Youth Point-in-Time Count, or the Queer Youth Project, please contact:

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Glossary of Terms

Transgender

A person whose gender identity differs from the one assigned to them at birth.

Non-binary

A person assigned female or male at birth who identifies as neither female nor male.

Agender

A term which can be literally translated as 'without gender'. It can be seen either as a non-binary gender identity or as a statement of not having a gender identity.

Genderfluid

Someone whose gender is fluid or changing, resulting in them experiencing different gender identities at different times, which may or may not be predictable.

Gender non-conforming

Someone whose gender identity and/or gender expression does not conform to the characteristics traditionally associated with their assigned sex at birth.

PITC

Point-in-Time Count. A Point-in-Time Count is a census of people experiencing homelessness at a single point in time.

YPITC

Youth Point-in-Time Count. A Youth Point-in-Time Count is a census of young people experiencing homelessness at a single point in time.

Introduction

This Youth Point-in-Time Count (YPITC), which was conducted independently from Whatcom County's Annual Point-in-Time Count (PITC) in January, had two goals:

1. To gather biannual data on youth homelessness for Northwest Youth Services, and;
2. To provide in-depth information about Whatcom County's LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness for the Queer Youth Project, a program of Northwest Youth Services.

The following is an exploration of the results of the 2015 Youth Point-in-Time Count.

An excerpt from the most recent Whatcom County Annual Report on Homelessness, conducted in January, 2015, provides context to this Youth Point-in-Time Count data:

“At any point in time, at least 651 people in Whatcom County are homeless. Throughout the year, hundreds more face the prospect of losing their homes due to economic reasons, domestic violence, family break up, lost job, and mental illness. Hundreds of students in our schools have unstable housing; as a result, their academic performance may suffer and they are likely to have lasting impacts from this adverse childhood experience. People released from psychiatric hospitalization and incarceration face challenging community re-entry issues. Furthermore, the recent recession, the painfully slow recovery, and associated high unemployment increases the risk of people losing their housing, and makes it increasingly difficult for people who become homeless to get back into a stable, permanent housing situation.”¹

The 2015 YPITC was conducted on a smaller scale and with a narrower scope than the County's annual efforts. Despite this difference, the data from the YPITC and the data from the Whatcom County PITC have similar trends. This report will explore the YPITC data in comparison with both the larger Whatcom County numbers and national averages. By contextualizing this information within the local and national climate, Northwest Youth Services hopes to get a better picture of the unique characteristics of Whatcom County's homeless youth population, and understand what factors may lead to a heightened risk of housing loss for this population.

Methodology and Limitations

Methods

A Point-in-Time Count is a census of people experiencing homelessness at a single point in time. It is conducted over a short period, usually 24 to 72 hours, in order to reduce the chances of participant duplication. The count is conducted as a survey which is administered by service providers, volunteers, and peer workers. Through a combination of phone calls, walking routes, driving routes, and on-location work (where volunteers stayed in one location to survey passersby) the YPITC was able to survey a wide variety of youth throughout Whatcom County.

The census data gathered from this survey is useful for service providers who work with homeless or unstably housed individuals. This year's YPITC focuses on people between the ages of 12 and 24 and gives a valuable glimpse into the housing instability and vulnerability experienced by young people in Whatcom County. By collecting and analyzing this data, Northwest Youth Services is able to adapt services to better meet the reported need.

Age was the only factor in determining if an individual was eligible to take the YPITC survey. Northwest Youth Services acknowledges that many youth have complex experiences around housing and family acceptance. The goal of this survey was to illustrate how homelessness affects young people in Whatcom County, but it was also designed to give more nuanced data on youth who have a history of running away from home, who frequently couch surf, or who do not feel safe in their homes. By gathering data on any youth between the ages of 12 and 24 rather than just those who are currently experiencing homelessness, Northwest Youth Services was able to get a more in-depth look at the variety of housing vulnerabilities experienced by young people in Whatcom County.

Limitations

National research indicates that Point-in-Time Counts often underestimate the number of people experiencing homelessness.² The short time frame decreases duplication but it also limits the scope of the project, as it is difficult to cover all areas in the county where people experiencing homelessness may be living. This report acknowledges that it is not possible to know where every unsheltered person in our county resides. There are many places that provide unconventional shelter (i.e. tents, abandoned buildings) that were undoubtedly missed. Additionally, Northwest Youth Services recognizes that this annual count, while conducted 6 months after Whatcom County's annual PITC, still may not capture those who cycle in and out of homelessness frequently, or any other seasonal fluctuations in the landscape of homelessness.

This count was limited in its ability to administer surveys outside the urban areas of Whatcom County. Many places where people experiencing homelessness live are outside the densely populated city centers, however, the services for these people are usually located within a central business district. For this reason, the Youth Point-in-Time Count was able to count the people who attended community meals or were visiting different service providers, but probably missed any who did not travel into city limits. This limitation was somewhat mitigated by hiring Point-in-Time Count Peer Workers – young

people who have recently or are currently experiencing homelessness – to help administer the surveys. Their knowledge of areas where unsheltered peers were staying and how to approach them provided invaluable support.

Finally, the accuracy of the gender and sexuality information may be compromised by the fact that data deduplication involved collecting name or initials and date of birth from participants. National research shows that it is a best practice to employ an anonymous data collection format for questions about gender identity and sexual orientation. The Institute of Medicine Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Issues and Research Gaps and Opportunities published a report in 2011, entitled *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People: Building a Foundation for Better Understanding*, which states:

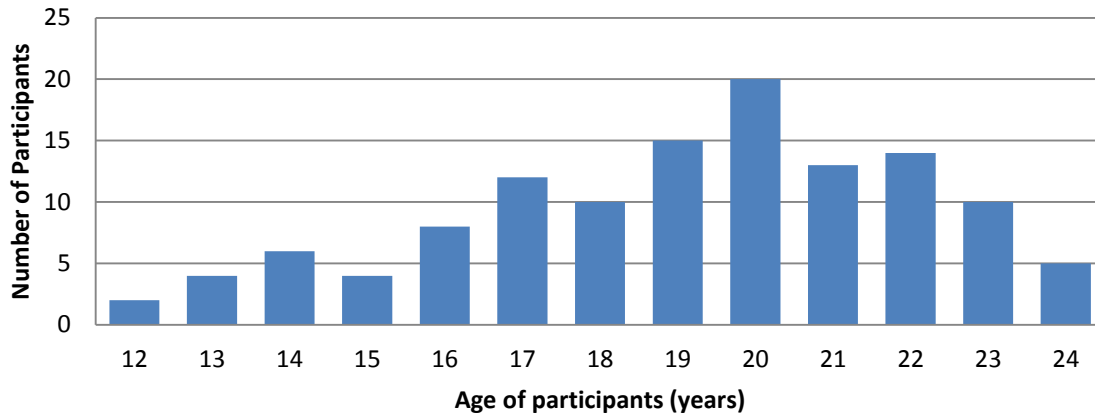
“Anonymity may yield higher rates of disclosure. For example, research participants may be more willing to disclose same-sex behavior or attractions when they provide their responses via computer rather than in a face-to-face interview...Collecting data in a private setting and taking steps to establish rapport before asking questions about sensitive topics may also increase respondents' willingness to disclose sensitive information...Respondents may be more willing to disclose sensitive information about themselves when their participation is anonymous.”³

This year's YPITC conducted data collection under strict confidentiality standards and strove to make the survey as safe a place for disclosure as is possible within the limitations of a face-to-face data collection technique. All survey administrators were trained in the Northwest Youth Services' confidentiality policy. While it cannot replicate the accuracy of an anonymous survey, this data set does begin to illustrate the demographics of our youth community. It is expected that the figures presented in this report are an underestimation of the actual number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning youth experiencing homelessness in our community.

Results

Age Distribution

This survey was conducted with young people between the ages of 12 and 24 years of age. The YPITC found that 29% of respondents were under 18 years of age, qualifying them as minors. A total of 16% of respondents were 20 years old, making that the most common age surveyed.



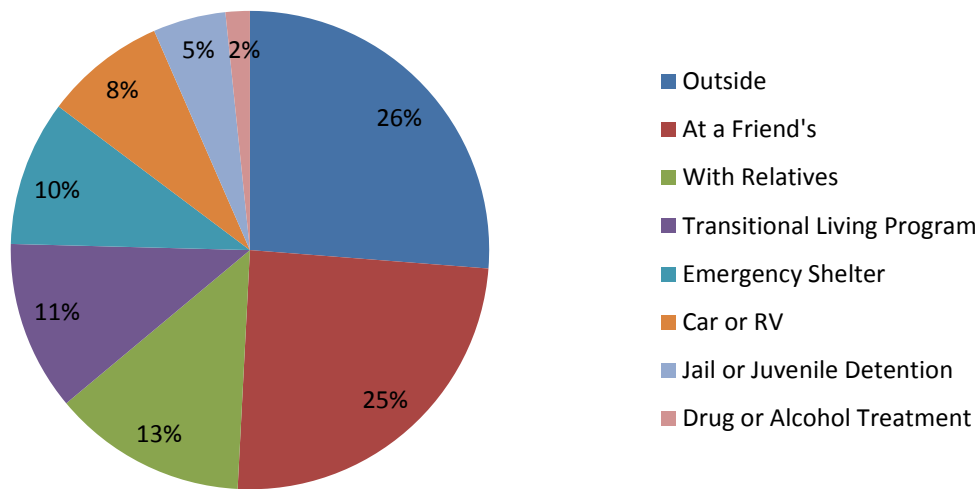
Sources of Shelter

The YPITC adheres to the definitions of homelessness provided by the Whatcom County January, 2015 PITC report:

“Sheltered homeless persons stayed in emergency shelter or in transitional housing on the night before the Count. Unsheltered persons stayed outdoors, in cars, or other places not meant for habitation on the night before the Count.”¹

Some respondents reported being stably housed the night before the Count took place. Of the respondents that did *not* report being stably housed the night before the YPITC, the most commonly reported situations were either literally homeless, defined by the U.S. Department of Housing as “individuals and families who live in a place not meant for human habitation (including the streets or in their car), emergency shelter, transitional housing, and hotels paid for by a government or charitable organization,” or couch-surfing (staying with friends).⁴ The figure below does not take into account those who chose the “other” option to the question “where did you stay last night?” because Northwest Youth Services cannot assume that “other” necessarily means that the person is unsheltered or unstably housed. The YPITC found that over 26% of unstably housed or homeless respondents had stayed outside the night before the Count.

Youth Sources of Shelter on the Night of the 2015 Count



Of the respondents represented in the graph above, 30% reported that they did not feel safe or only felt somewhat safe where they were staying. The survey found that 44% of these respondents either did not know if they could stay where they stayed the night before the Count for the next month or knew that they could not. Of those who were unsheltered or unstably housed the night before the Count, only 14% had been in the same place for one year or more. Safety and stability are not guaranteed elements in these young people’s lives.

The survey also asked respondents where they had stayed in the last three months. The data from this question revealed that, even for youth who had been stably housed the night before the Count (and who are therefore not represented in the above graph), many had experienced an unstable living situation in the three months prior to the Count. Out of the 124 respondents to the survey, 50% reported having experienced an unstable living situation sometime in the last three months.

Reasons for Leaving the Home

To gain a better understanding of the causes for homelessness within youth populations, The YPITC asked respondents to share the reasons they left home in the past. Over 67% of all youth surveyed cited at least one reason for having left home at some point in the past and most of those cited multiple reasons. The most commonly cited reason was family crisis or breakup, reported by nearly 43% of respondents. The second most cited reason for leaving the home, which was reported by 33% of respondents, was alcohol or substance abuse. The third most common reason, cited by almost 30% of respondents, was that they could not afford rent.

The YPITC found that of the 6 respondents who reported sexual abuse as being a factor for leaving home, over 66% identified as LGBTQ. On average, LGBTQ respondents cited at least three separate

reasons for having left their home. This could indicate that they had left home multiple times for different reasons, or that there were multiple factors leading to them exiting their home a single time.

Sexual Orientation

A national 2012 study conducted by the Williams Institute (in collaboration with the True Colors Fund and the Palette Fund) surveyed 381 young people. The goal of this study was to “assess the experiences of homeless youth organizations in providing services to LGBT youth” and to understand “the prevalence of LGBT youth within the homeless populations being served by these organizations.”⁵ This study found that of 381 respondents, 30% identified as gay or lesbian, nine percent as bisexual, and one percent as transgender.

In comparison, the 2015 YPITC surveyed a total of 124 people between the ages of 12 and 24 in Whatcom County. Out of these 124 respondents, 2.4 percent identified as lesbian or gay, which is considerably lower than the 30 percent reported in the Williams Institute study.⁵ Interestingly, the Youth Point-in-Time Count survey found that eight percent of respondents identified as bisexual, nearly matching the national average. Of respondents who identified as “other” (neither gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight), 10.4% identified as asexual, pansexual, queer, or questioning. There is no national research with similar data collection methods that included these identities as distinct options, so this percentage is difficult to compare to the larger population.

We saw a change in the distribution of sexual orientation results from 2014 to 2015. The 2014 YPITC had 88 survey respondents, while 2015 had 124 survey respondents. We saw small changes between these two data sets but the overall distribution was consistent from 2014 to 2015.

Below is a visualization of the responses from this year’s survey alongside the data from 2014. The “other” category encompasses “asexual”, “queer”, and “questioning” for the purposes of seeing the comparison between the two data sets:

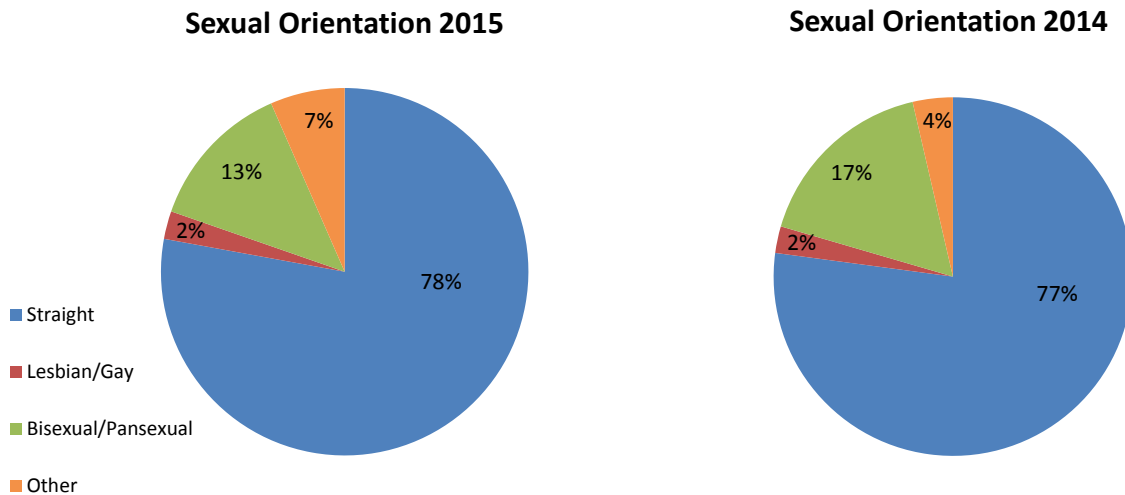


Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	Number	Percent
Gender		
Male	68	54.8
Female	48	38.7
Non-binary	4	3.2
Other	3	2.4
Missing	1	0.8
Total	124	100.0
Sexual Orientation		
Straight	95	76.6
Gay/Bisexual	3	2.4
Other	6	4.8
Missing	4	3.2
Total	124	100.0
Race		
White	77	62.1
American Indian/ Alaska Native	13	10.5
Hispanic	12	9.7
Mixed	7	5.6
Black	5	4.0
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	3	2.4
Other	5	4.0
Missing	2	1.6
Total	124	100.0

Table 2 shows the relationship between gender identity and an individual's feeling about whether or not they identified as transgender. On the left you can see the four gender options: male, female, non-binary, and other. Along the top of the table are the answers to the question "do you identify as transgender?" The answers could either be yes, no, questioning, or be missing from the data. Table 2 illustrates client gender identity and whether or not they considered that identity to be transgender.

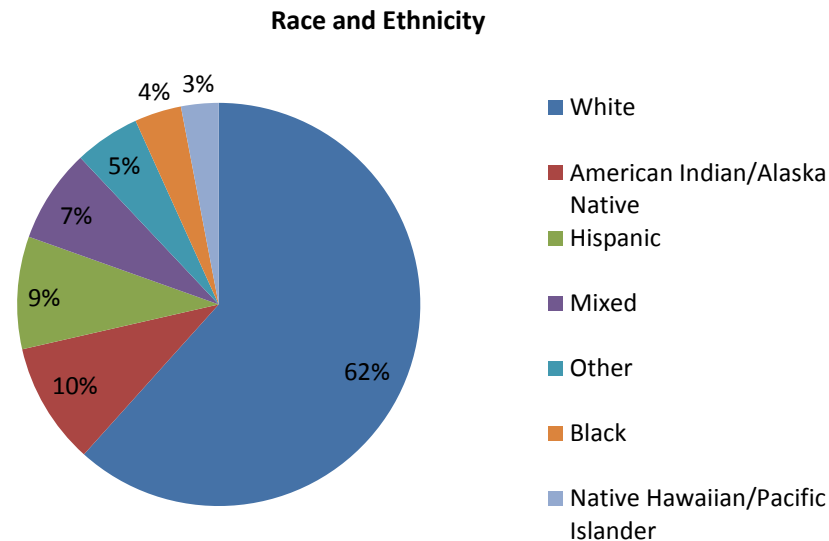
Table 2: Transgender Identity

	Yes		No		Questioning		Missing	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Male	--	--	61	89.7	--	--	7	10.3
Female	1	2.1	38	79.2	2	4.2	7	14.6
Non-binary	2	50	2	50	--	--	--	--
Other	1	25	2	50	--	--	1	25

These two questions about gender illustrated a very important and often-overlooked distinction: not all folks who identify outside the gender binary of male and female consider themselves to be transgender. The YPITC numbers around gender identity show that 4.8 percent of respondents identified as transgender, or were questioning if they were transgender. This indicates that in Whatcom County, we are serving a higher percentage of gender-nonconforming and transgender individuals than represented in national numbers.

Race and Ethnicity

According to data gathered in 2013, 87.6% of Whatcom County residents identify as white only.⁶ The 2015 Youth Point-in-Time Count found that over 36% of survey respondents identified with a race or ethnicity other than white. When compared with the County’s census data, this demonstrates a disproportionate number of racial and ethnic minorities experiencing homelessness. Additionally, 31% of survey participants who identified as a racial or ethnic minority spent the night of the count literally homeless. The chart below shows the distribution of responses from the July 2015 survey results.



Of the respondents who identified with a race or ethnicity other than white, 53% were homeless or unstably housed the night before the Count *and* 53% had been homeless or unstably housed sometime in the past three months. Additionally, 26% of respondents who identified with a race or ethnicity other than white didn’t know if they could stay where they were for the next month, or knew they would not be able to stay. Over four percent of respondents who identified with a race or ethnicity other than white reported that a language barrier had been a reason for why they left their home.

Conclusion

This report can conclude from the data that youth are experiencing multiple different identities at the same time. The findings about gender in this research stand out as unique, showing that some individuals who are non-binary or who are questioning their gender identity do not necessarily identify as transgender. This nuance informs how Northwest Youth Services will conduct gender-related data collection in the future, and is useful in understanding the complexities of gender identity in this population. This report cannot draw any conclusions from this data about the impact of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or any intersectionality of these factors on how youth in Whatcom County experience homelessness or housing instability. The sample size was small and thus not representative of the population, and this research acted as a pilot in which we learned how best to collect this data in the future. We will likely see national trends reflected in our data when we are able to conduct a census representative of this population.

Future directions of this annual Youth Point-in-Time Count project include expanding the sample size, adjusting survey questions to provide more meaningful data, and outlining a clear procedure for data collection prior to conducting the census. We hypothesize that with these adjustments, the 2016 Youth Point-in-Time Count will show stronger trends that reflect national research and show clearer correlations between identity and homelessness that will help inform the services we provide to youth in Whatcom County.

Citations

1. *A Home for Everyone: Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness 2015 Annual Report*. Bellingham, WA: Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness; June 2015.
2. *A Home for Everyone: Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness 2014 Annual Report*. Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness; May 2014.
3. *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People: Building a Foundation for Better Understanding*. Washington, DC: Institute of Medicine; 2011.
4. *HUD's Homeless Definition as it Relates to Children and Youth*. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; October 2014.
5. Durso LE, Gates GJ. *Serving Our Youth: Findings from a National Survey of Service Providers Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth who are Homeless or At Risk of Becoming Homeless*. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute with True Colors Fund and The Palette Fund; 2012.
6. *Whatcom County, Washington*. State & County QuickFacts. Vol 2015: U.S. Census Bureau; 2015.

Appendix

Youth Point-in-Time Count Survey Questions

Name/Alias/Initials: _____

Age: _____ Date of Birth: ___/___/___ Location of Survey: _____

Did you participate in the Whatcom County Point-in-Time Count this past January? Yes No

If yes, have you been without a stable place to live since January? Yes No

Where did you stay last night? [Check one]:

- At parents' Foster home At friend's Outside/Tent
- Abandoned building Jail/Juv. Detention With my relatives Drug/Alcohol Treatment
- Hospital Emergency Shelter Transitional Living Program Hotel/Motel
- In a Car or RV Other: _____

How long have you lived where you stayed last night?

- 1-6 days 1-4 weeks 1-3 months 3-6 months 6-12 months 1 year or more

Can you live where you stayed last night for the next month? Yes No I don't know

Do you feel safe where you are currently staying? Yes No

Where did you live in the last 3 months? [Check all that apply]:

- At parents' Foster home At friend's Outside/Tent
- Abandoned building Jail/Juv. Detention With my relatives Drug/Alcohol Treatment
- Hospital Emergency Shelter Transitional Living Program Hotel/Motel
- In a Car or RV Other: _____

We want to understand more about the housing issues young people face so that we can provide better services. Have any of the following situations caused you to leave home? [Check all that apply]:

- Alcohol/Substance Abuse Sexual Orientation/Gender Sexual Abuse
- Language Barrier Violence in the home Job Loss
- Aged out of Foster Care Ran away from Foster Care Mental Illness
- Eviction Discharged from an Institution Can't Afford Rent
- Family Crisis/Breakup Lack of Childcare Can't Find a Job
- Don't Know Illness/Health Problems Medical Costs
- Conviction Another Reason _____ Refused

We have a few questions on sexual orientation and gender identity. We would like to know these things because it will help us improve services to all youth. "Sex" is

what a person is assigned at birth. "Gender" is how a person feels. When someone's gender identity differs from their assigned sex, they may identify as transgender.

Which response best describes you?

- Gender : Do you identify as transgender?
- Male Female Nonbinary Other _____ Yes No Questioning/I don't know

Sexual Orientation: Which of the following best represents how you think of yourself?

- Heterosexual/Straight Lesbian Gay Bisexual Pansexual Questioning
- Asexual Queer Refused Other _____

What is your Race or Ethnicity? [Check all that apply]

- American Indian/Alaska Native African American/Black Asian
- Other/Multiple _____
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Caucasian/White Hispanic Refused

Have you heard of Northwest Youth Services? Yes No **Have you ever received services there before?** Yes No

If you have experience with NWYS, do you consider them to be a safe place for LGBTQ youth? Yes No