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THE ROLE OF LGBTQ+ YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS IN ADDRESSING FOOD INSUFFICIENCY

January 2024

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Insufficient access to food is an issue that impacts many in the United States, including LGBTQ+ youth. However, due to the stigma LGBTQ+ youth face, they may have less access to food through programs designed to serve the general population (e.g., school meal programs, food pantries) and less support from families of origin than their cisgender, heterosexual peers. Community-based LGBTQ+ youth programs are a potential avenue to increase youth access to food. Thus, it is important to understand what LGBTQ+ youth programs are doing to feed youth—including learning from their successes and challenges. To gather this information, we surveyed 73 LGBTQ+ youth programs affiliated with the CenterLink network of LGBTQ+ community centers or identified through a targeted internet search in the summer of 2023.

KEY FINDINGS

LGBTQ+ Youth Food Insufficiency

- Half of LGBTQ+ youth organizations reported that more than 20% of the youth they served did not always have enough to eat in the past week.
- Older youth ages 18 to 25, transgender youth, and Black and Latinx youth more commonly did not have enough to eat.
- Unstable housing was the most frequent reason programs reported for why youth lack adequate access to food (84.9%), followed by lack of access to jobs that pay livable wages (71.2%), family food insecurity (68.5%), lack of family support (63.0%), and transportation barriers (47.9%).
  - Most LGBTQ+ youth programs (73.2%) reported that more than one in ten of the LGBTQ+ youth they serve are unstably housed.
  - Almost one-quarter of programs (23.3%) reported that at least 10% of the youth they serve were engaged in sex work to meet their basic needs, including food and shelter.
- Programs were more likely to identify several other food sources for LGBTQ+ youth besides their families of origin.
  - The most frequently cited sources of food were community-based organizations, food pantries or kitchens (91.8%), chosen family or friends (82.2%), school meals (72.6%), and on their own by working (64.4%).
  - Only 60.3% of programs identified family of origin as a food source for the youth they serve, just slightly more than the percentage (56.2%) who identified obtaining food through street economies, such as sex work, drug trade, and other nontraditional exchanges.

Strategies for Increasing Access to Food

- Programs have tried many strategies to facilitate access to food, including providing food directly and making referrals.
  - Among the 65 programs that reported providing food directly, 100% provided staples or prepackaged food to take home, 96.9% offered on-site snacks, and 53.8% provided hot meals.

- Among the programs that provided food directly, less than half (42.2%) offered access to food daily, and over one-third offered food less than once a week or only on a case-by-case basis.

- Among the programs that did not provide food, insufficient financial resources (100.0%) and inadequate facilities (87.5%) were the most common reasons for not providing food.

  - Only one program indicated that they do not provide food because the LGBTQ+ youth they served had stable access to food.

- Strategies tried by programs that provide food directly include the following:

  - Providing food directly to youth in the form of meals or snacks (95.2%)

  - Sharing information about local food resources (90.3%)

  - Offering a food pantry (72.6%)

  - Providing gift cards (66.1%)

  - Providing eligibility counseling (56.5%) or enrollment assistance (50.0%) for SNAP, WIC, or other public benefits

- The strategies that the programs identified as the most successful to increasing food access were providing meals or snacks directly, offering a food pantry, giving gift cards to grocery stores or restaurants, and providing cash assistance.

Lessons from Successful Strategies to Increase Access to Food

- Several programs mentioned that providing food to everyone, regardless of need, increased access and reduced stigma and shame around needing food.

  We believe people when they say they need food assistance. We do not require any proof of need.

  Dinner is served to all youth regardless of need, lowering stigma of those participating in meals.

- Some programs emphasized youth engagement as central to their success—from consulting youth about what they want for on-site meals to assisting with running the food pantry to hiring youth.

  We allow our youth to get involved. Specifically with things like restocking our pantry and organizing products. This helped with removing a lot of the stigma around accessing pantry foods.

  Our most successful strategy has been hiring youth with lived experience to advertise and manage the program.

- Other programs also said that providing meals and snacks in the context of other activities and programs helped to reduce stigma.

  We host a monthly meal night where youth [ages] 16 to 24 can come get a hot meal. What makes this monthly offering so successful is that the theme changes every month, and youth know that they are also coming to join a fun event and not just get free food. Some examples are an open mic night or karaoke night. This breaks down some of the stigma youth may have around getting free food.

- Providing food directly was not only a way to meet the needs of youth facing food insecurity but also to bring them into the organization's other programs, build community with each other, and create connection between them and the organizations more broadly.

    Feeding people meets a need, but it also contributes to a welcoming environment. This is one of the ways we are able to demonstrate community care.

    Youth bond over a shared meal, youth come from school as a group usually and are hungry and look forward to the food we have.

- Other programs described how external partnerships and collaborations contributed to their success.

    From a sustainability/operational perspective, our most successful strategies include engaging local partners such as school districts and pantries.

Lessons from Less Successful Strategies to Increase Access to Food

Programs also shared insights from strategies that their organizations found less successful in increasing access to food for LGBTQ+ youth.

- **Food pantry referrals.** One program staff succinctly summarized several challenges related to using off-site charitable food resources.

    Youth who were given other food bank information did not utilize those services. The main reasons were that food banks were at religious-based organizations, hours were too early, youth did not have documentation to meet requirements, and lack of transportation.

- **On-site food pantries.** Organizations described challenges offering on-site pantries, including youth not having resources to cook the food they received.

    Shelf-stable food that requires many steps in cooking was our least successful strategy. Most youth either don't have access to a place to cook or don't have the desire to gain the skills for cooking.

- **Shopping and cooking classes.** Several organizations noted challenges with such classes, including low interest among youth.

    The cooking classes were difficult to manage and did not draw attendance, both in-person and online.

- **Cash aid.** Several programs indicated organizational constraints in providing cash aid to youth for food and concerns that the funding would be used for other purposes.

    Cash often got prioritized for other needs youth deemed more important, so food took a back seat.

- **Public benefits.** A few programs described the high level of effort required by youth and program staff to enroll in government assistance programs and a low level of return.

    Florida SNAP benefits are really hard to access and when folks do qualify, it's not enough money to actually survive.

I think they worked on a case-by-case individual level. However, they didn't have major impact due to lack of capacity and the difficulty to know if youth followed up with the government assistance programs.

- **Transportation assistance.** Staff from several programs described offering transportation assistance as a "huge challenge" or identified distance and limited public transportation services as a barrier to connecting LGBTQ+ youth with resources.

    [Offering transportation assistance was] not sustainable as the majority of our community members would need weekly transportation forever in order to keep accessing food.

Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth and Youth Organizations

- When asked to identify the top three broader changes that would increase access to food for LGBTQ+ youth, all three of the most selected changes focused on housing:

    - Increasing access to youth transitional housing (76.7%)
    - Increasing the availability of affordable housing (57.5%)
    - Increasing access to housing vouchers for 18-to 25-year-olds (54.8%)

- In addition, the programs prioritized the following broader changes:

    - Increasing the minimum wage (50.7%)
    - Changing SNAP eligibility criteria (42.5%)
    - Free or discounted transit passes (41.1%)
    - Changing identity document laws (30.1%)

- Organizations indicated that flexible funding, partnerships with local businesses, and funding from local, state, or federal government would aid them in increasing their ability to provide food to youth.

Community-based LGBTQ+ youth programs are a viable mechanism to get food to LGBTQ+ youth. On-site meals, snacks, and food pantries are effective ways to provide food to youth and connect youth to services. Increasing access to consistent and flexible funding would support programs in feeding more youth more often. Programs identified housing as the number one barrier to food sufficiency for LGBTQ+ youth and endorsed increased access to youth transitional housing, housing vouchers, and more affordable housing as longer-term changes that would allow resources to be shifted from shelter to food. Future research should explore access to nutritionally adequate food, including access to fresh produce and hot meals, and strategies to improve access.

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that as many as one in five (20.1%) LGBT high schoolers experience hunger because there is not enough food at home. Although the National School Lunch and National School Breakfast programs are reliable sources of food for millions of U.S. students, LGBT youth may not derive the same benefit due to school-based harassment. About one in three LGBT high school youth has been bullied at school in the past year—nearly twice as many as their non-LGBT peers—which increases their likelihood of skipping school, avoiding the cafeteria, and missing meals to be safe.

Older LGBT youth also experience insufficient access to food. More 18-to 24-year-old LGBT youth indicated that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat in the past week on the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey than their non-LGBT peers (13.9% vs. 10.1%). Not being able to afford to buy more food was a barrier to adequate access to food for more than half of food insufficient 18-to-24-year-olds, regardless of LGBT status. However, somewhat more LGBT than non-LGBT youth reported difficulty paying for household expenses (16.6% vs. 12.0%, respectively) in the week prior to survey completion—including, but not limited to, food, rent or mortgage, car payments, medical expenses, and student loans.

Racial inequities in access to food observed in the general population have also been observed among LGBT youth. More Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) high school youth, LGBT and non-LGBT alike, report experiencing hunger because there is not enough food at home than their White, non-Hispanic peers—which is consistent with racial-ethnic patterns in adult poverty. Similarly, more 18-to-24-year-old BIPOC youth, LGBT and non-LGBT, report not having enough food to eat than their White, non-Hispanic counterparts.

Both public and private food resources may be underutilized by LGBTQ+ youth. More than half to two-thirds of income-eligible LGBT adults, like their non-LGBT counterparts, are not enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (formerly known as the "food stamps" program). SNAP benefits are linked to income and set at a maximum of $291 per month for a household of one earning up to $1,580 per month in pre-tax income for 2023-2024. Further, food banks, many of which have been religiously affiliated, may not be viewed as welcoming places by LGBTQ+ youth. Qualitative studies conducted in southern California and the southeastern U.S. found that some LGBTQ+ people anticipate rejection or judgment and that others have experienced staring and looks of "disgust" at religiously affiliated food pantries. Finally, LGBTQ+ youth may have less access to food and economic support through families of origin than their cisgender, heterosexual peers due to LGBTQ+ stigma.

Community-based LGBTQ+ youth programs are a potential avenue to increase access to food for LGBTQ+ youth—both as direct food providers and as sources of information about SNAP, welcoming food pantries, and other economic supports. Thus, understanding whether and how these programs address food insufficiency, including learning from their successes and understanding their barriers, is important in considering their potential role in combatting food insufficiency among LGBTQ+ youth. To gather this information, we surveyed LGBTQ+ youth programs affiliated with the CenterLink network of LGBTQ+ community centers or identified through a targeted internet search in August and September 2023. The findings are presented below.
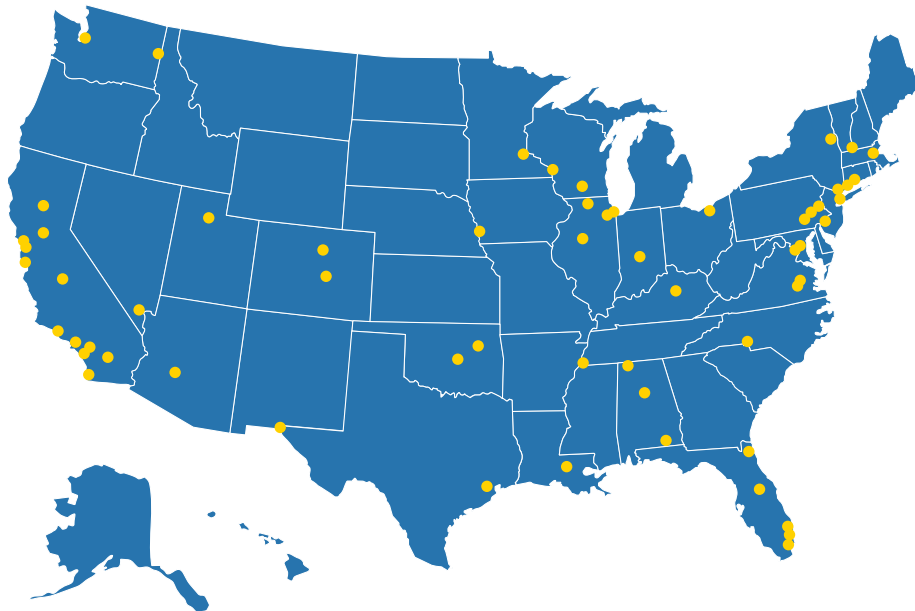
FINDINGS

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPATING LGBTQ+ YOUTH PROGRAMS

Program staff from 73 LGBTQ+ youth organizations across the mainland U.S. completed surveys (Figure 1). Programs were represented across Census regions and urban (60.3%), suburban (28.8%), and rural (11.0%) parts of the county (Appendix, Table 1).

**Figure 1. Location of participating LGBTQ+ youth organizations**

Most programs (87.5%) reported no eligibility requirements for LGBTQ+ youth to participate in their programs. While eight programs had age requirements, only one required proof of residency and/or income. Most programs reported that they serve LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 13 (55.1%) and 25 (61.4%), but almost 45% (44.9%) serve youth ages 12 and younger, and over a third (38.6%) serve youth older than 25 (Appendix, Table 1).

CHARACTERISTICS OF LGBTQ+ YOUTH SERVED BY PROGRAMS

More than half (54.4%) of programs reported that they serve a mixture of people under and over the age of 18. Relatively few (13.2%) programs reported that three-quarters or more of the LGBTQ+ youth they serve are under the age of 18, and 32.4% reported that three-quarters or more of the LGBTQ+ youth they serve are over the age of 18 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percent of youth served by LGBTQ+ youth programs who are under the age of 18
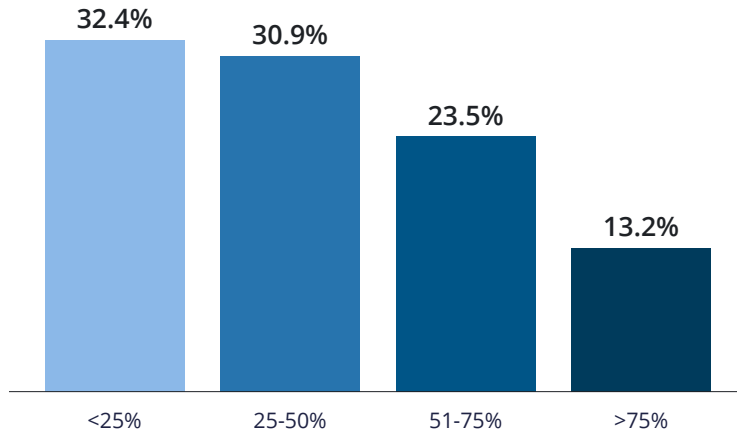
Almost a third (32.4%) of programs reported that they serve predominantly youth of color, while about two-thirds (67.7%) indicated that less than half of their clients are youth of color. (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percent of youth served by LGBTQ+ youth programs who are youth of color
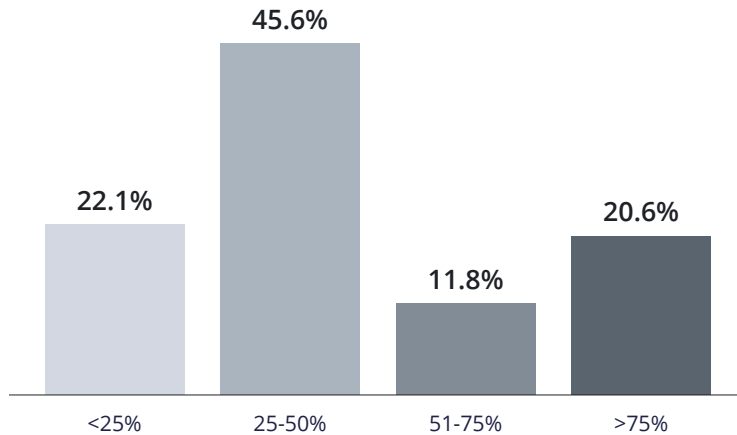
Most (73.2%) LGBTQ+ youth programs reported that more than one in ten of the LGBTQ+ youth they serve are unstably housed, including one-fourth (23.9%) that reported that more than 30% of youth they served are unstably housed (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Percent of youth served by LGBTQ+ youth programs who are unstably housed
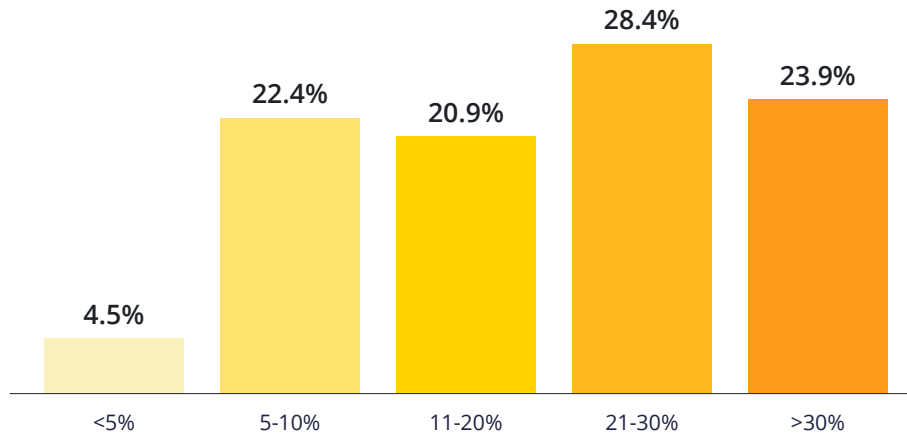
Almost one-fourth of programs (23.3%) reported that at least 10% of the youth they serve were engaged in sex work to meet their basic needs, including food and shelter (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Percent of youth served by LGBTQ+ youth programs who are engaged in sex work to meet basic needs
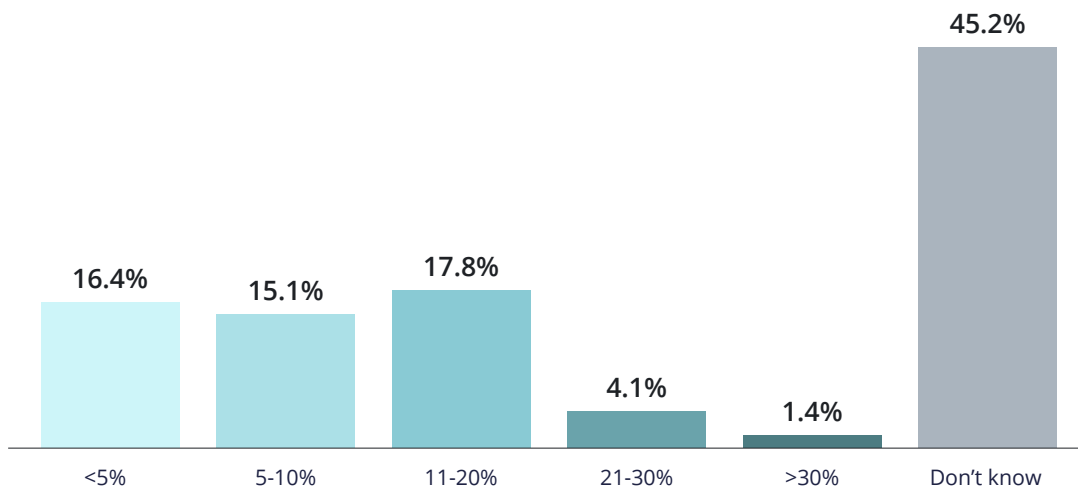
FOOD INSUFFICIENCY

Half (50%) of programs reported that more than 20% of LGBTQ+ youth they serve did not always have enough to eat in the last week (Figure 6). As shown in Figure 7, nearly 70% of programs indicated that transgender, non-binary, and non-conforming youth (68.5%) and older youth aged 18-to-25 (68.5%) were more likely not to have enough food to eat, compared to other groups of youth served. Close to half of programs indicated that Black (49.3%) and Latinx youth (47.9%) more commonly experience food insufficiency than other groups.

Figure 6. Percent of youth served by LGBTQ+ youth programs who did not have enough to eat in the past 7 days
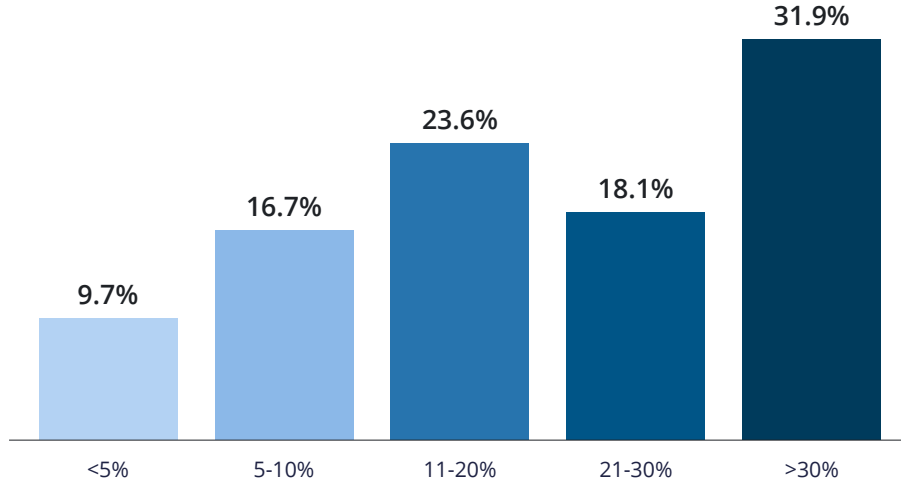
Figure 7. Sociodemographic groups that more commonly report food insufficiency among youth served by LGBTQ+ youth programs
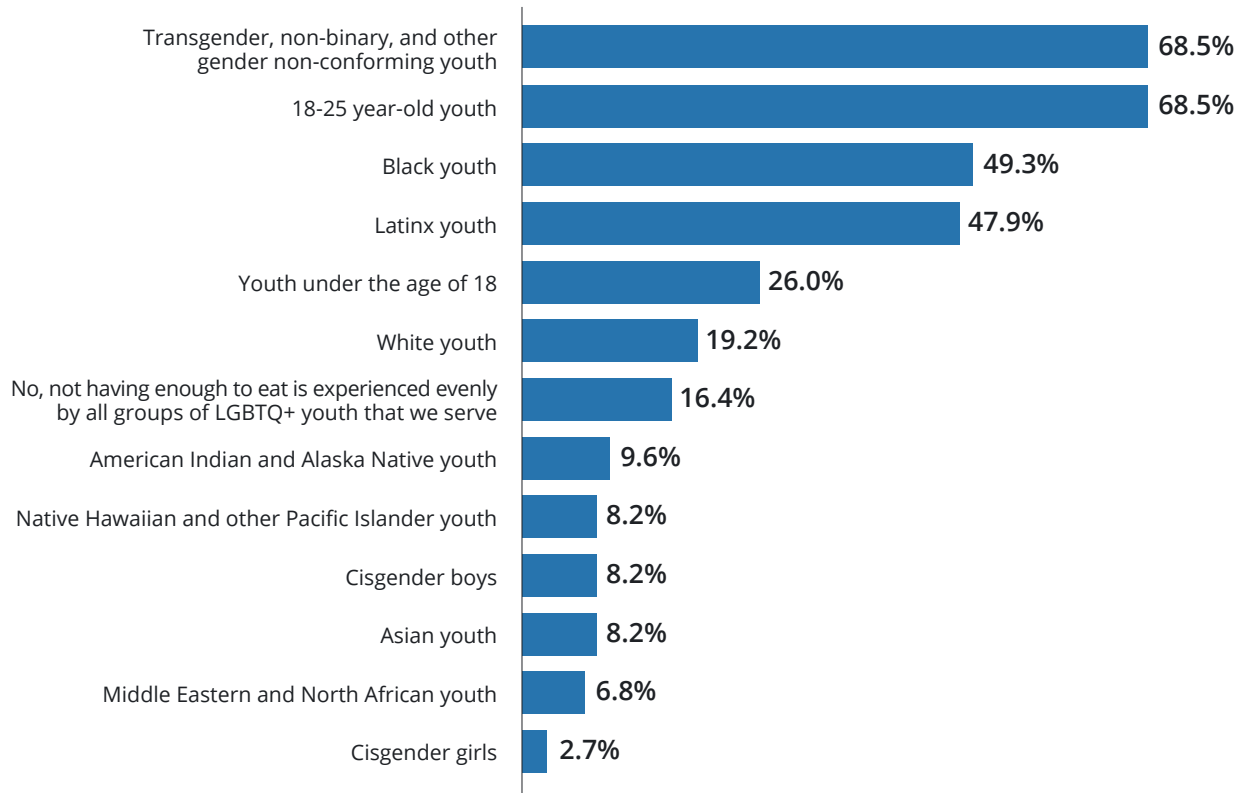
Sources of Food Among Youth

Programs reported that LGBTQ+ youth access food through multiple sources, including through formal (e.g., organizations, schools) and informal (e.g., chosen family) networks and on their own (Figure 8). Most (91.8%) programs reported that youth access food through community-based

organizations (including their own), food pantries or kitchens. Many (82.2%) programs indicated that chosen family or friends are a source of food. Almost three-quarters of programs (72.6%) reported that youth accessed food through school meals; however, that percentage reached 100% among programs that served primarily youth under 18 (not shown). More than half (60.3%) of programs identified family of origin as a source of food for the youth they serve. Youth also obtain food on their own; 64.4% of programs indicated that youth pay for food themselves through wages, and 56.2% indicated that they obtain food through street economies.

Figure 8. Sources of food among youth served by LGBTQ+ youth programs
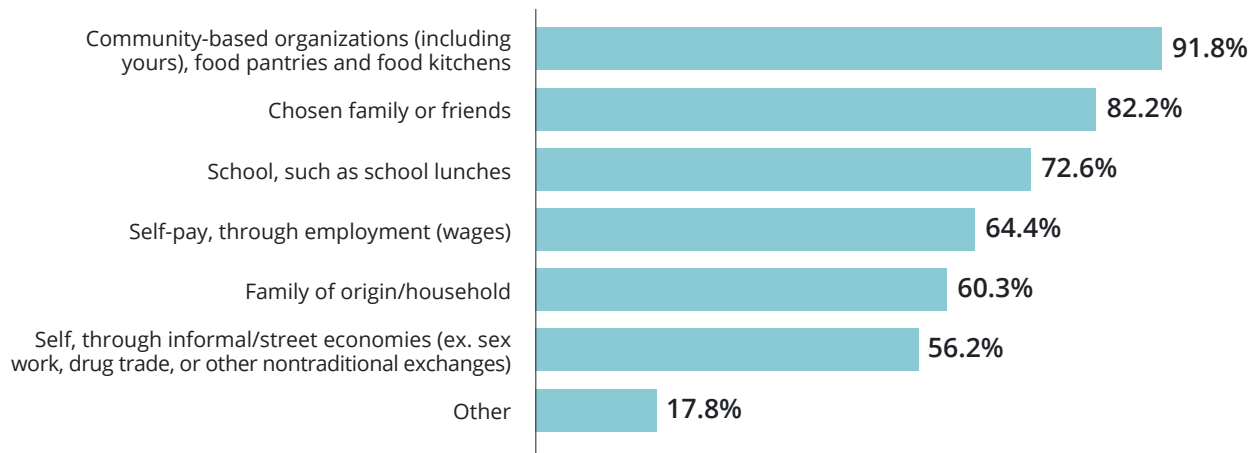
Barriers to Accessing Food Among Youth

When asked to select the top three reasons why LGBTQ+ youth served by their organizations do not have adequate access to food, 84.9% of programs indicated that unstable housing was a top reason (Figure 9). Lack of access to jobs that pay livable wages (71.2%), family food insecurity (68.5%), family rejection (63.0%), and transportation barriers (47.9%) were the following most often endorsed reasons.

Figure 9. Reasons for insufficient access to food among youth served by LGBTQ+ youth programs
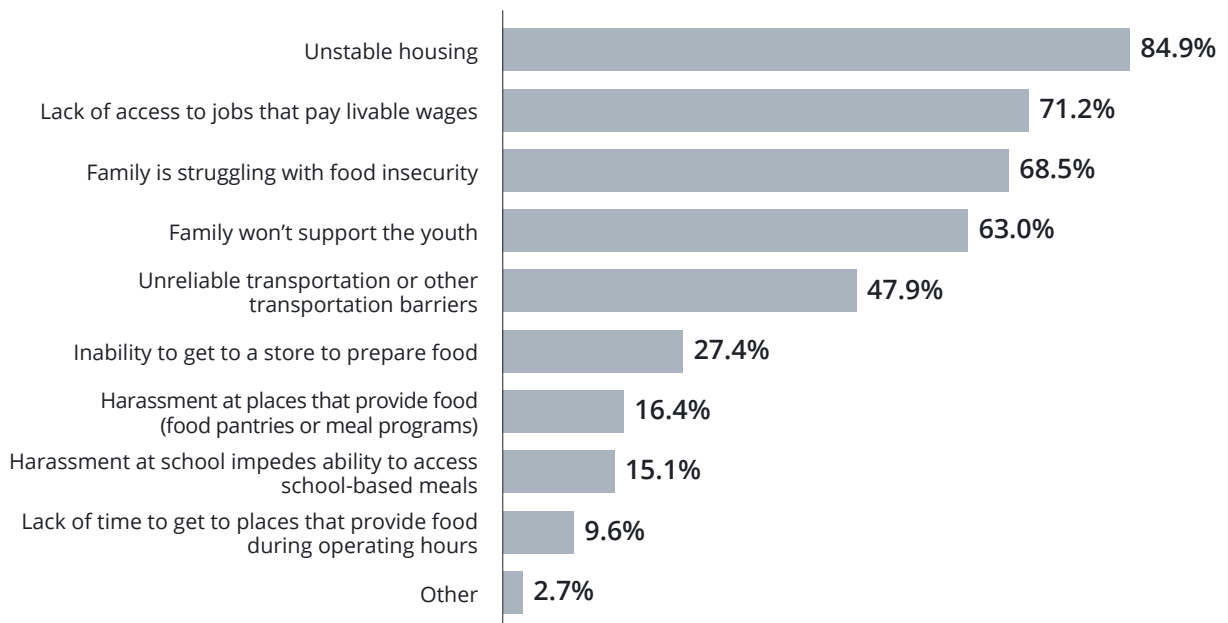
STRATEGIES USED TO INCREASE ACCESS TO FOOD

LGBTQ+ youth programs that addressed food insecurity through more than just providing referrals to other organizations (65) were asked about the specific strategies they had tried to increase food access for youth, as well as their perspectives on what strategies were most and least successful. In general, providing food directly was both the most common way in which programs addressed food insecurity and the strategy found to be the most successful.

Programs were shown a list of specific strategies to increase food access and were asked to indicate which strategies, if any, the organization had ever used (Figure 10). Providing food directly to youth (in the form of meals or snacks), sharing information about local resources, offering a food pantry, providing gift cards, and providing eligibility counseling or enrollment assistance for SNAP, WIC, or other public benefits were tried by more than half of programs. Over 90% of programs reported providing meals and snacks (95.2%) and sharing information about local food resources (90.3%).

Figure 10. Strategies ever used to increase youth access to food by LGBTQ+ youth programs
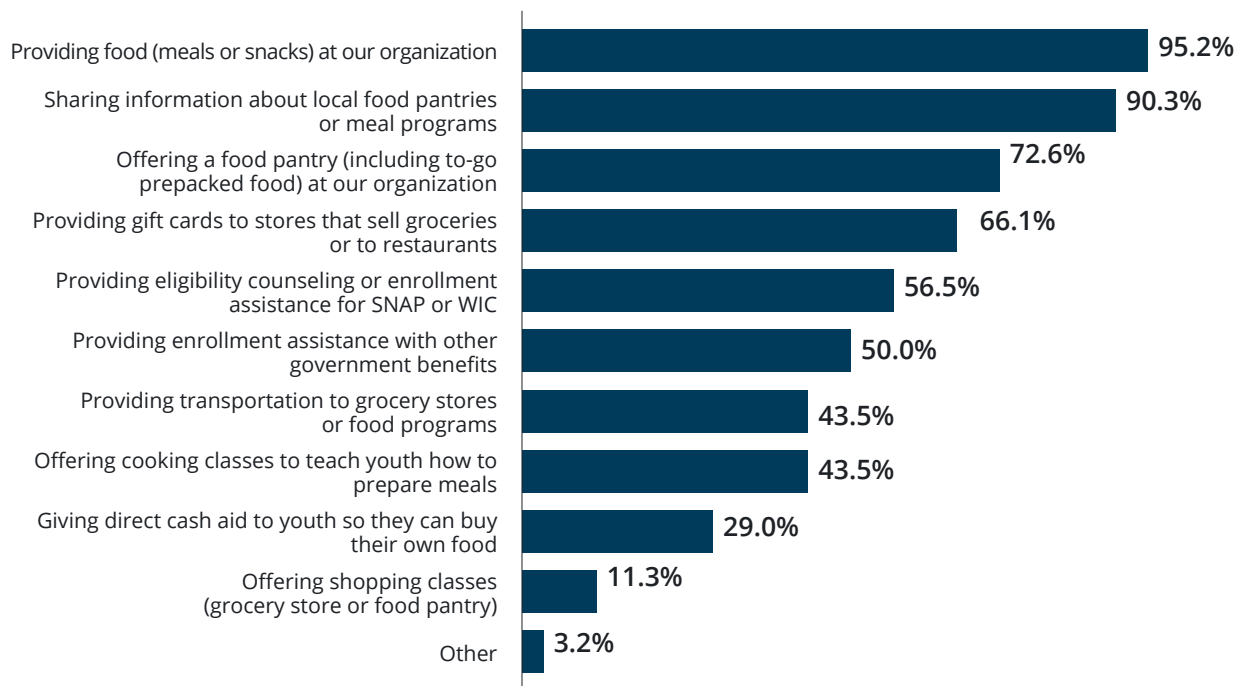
These programs were also asked to identify the three most "successful" strategies they had used to increase access to food for LGBTQ+ youth. Programs most often defined success based on the number of youth served, the benefit to the most vulnerable youth, and the engagement of new youth in their programs (Appendix 1, Table 1). The strategies that these programs identified as the most successful, among those that tried the strategy, were providing meals or snacks directly (91.5%), offering a food pantry (80.0%), giving gift cards to grocery stores (61.0%), and direct cash aid (50.0%).

Ways LGBTQ+ Youth Programs Provide Food Directly to Youth

Of 65 programs that reported that they currently provide food directly, all reported that they provided staples or prepackaged food to take home. Almost all (96.9%) reported they provided snacks at the organization. Over half (53.8%) served hot meals at the organization, and over one-quarter (27.7%) delivered food to where youth lived (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Ways programs provide food to LGBTQ+ youth

Food (staples or prepackaged) to take home — **100.0%**
Snacks are provided at our organization — **96.9%**
Hot meals are served at our organization — **53.8%**
Delivery of food to youth where they live — **27.7%**
Other — **16.9%**
Drop-offs at community fridges — **9.2%**
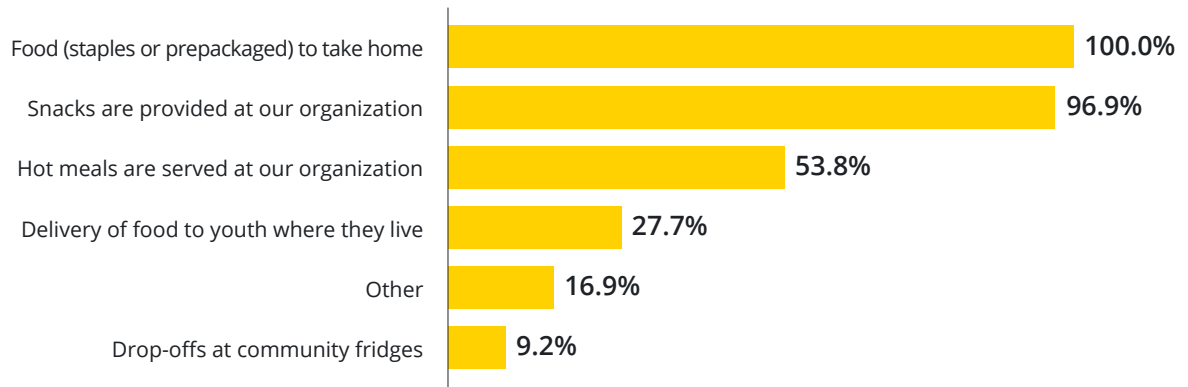
Frequency of Providing Food by Youth Programs

Among programs that provided food, less than half (42.2%) offered access to food daily (Figure 12). Over one-third (34.4.%) offered food less than once a week or only on a case-by-case basis.

Figure 12. Frequency of providing food at LGBTQ+ youth programs

Daily — **42.2%**
2-3 times per week — **23.4%**
Once per week — **17.2%**
2-3 times per month — **3.1%**
It varies on a case-by-case basis — **14.1%**
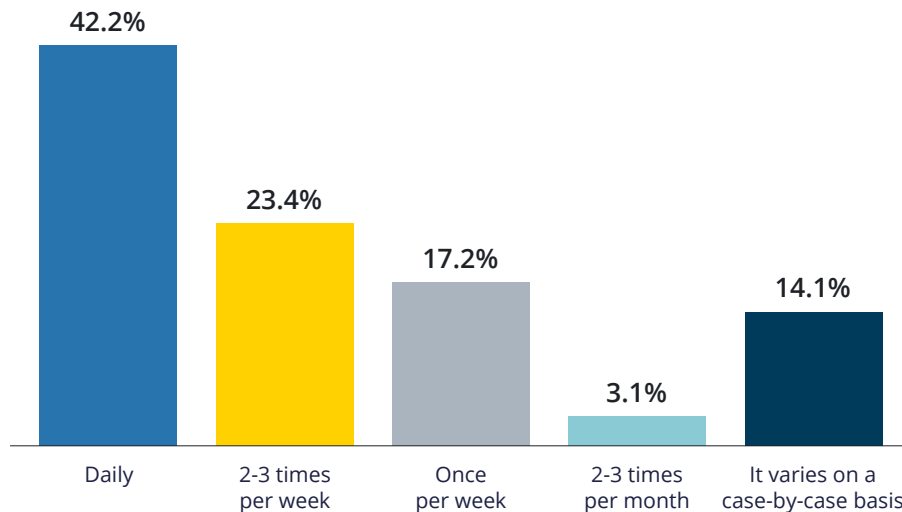
Sources of Food for Youth Programs

Among programs that provided food, most (93.8%) purchased it from retailers, 78.1% received in-kind donations, and approximately half got food from food banks (50.8%) and restaurants (44.3%) (Figure 13). More than one in seven programs (16.4%) grew or got food from community gardens or farms.

Figure 13. Sources of food to feed youth at LGBTQ+ youth programs

Source	Percentage
We purchase it from retailers (grocery stores, wholesale clubs like Costco or Sam's Club, other retailers)	93.8%
In-kind donations	78.1%
We get it from our local food bank/food pantry	50.8%
We get it from restaurants	44.3%
We purchase it from wholesalers (grocery wholesale, restaurant wholesale, food distributors like Sysco or US Foods)	27.0%
We receive "rescued" food from local businesses	19.0%
We grow or receive food from a community garden/farm	16.4%

Sources of Funding for Youth Food Programs

As shown in Figure 14, programs relied on multiple funding sources to feed youth, including their organizational budgets, donations of food and money, and grants.

Figure 14. Funding sources for youth food programs among LGBTQ+ youth programs

Funding source	Percentage
Organizational budget	79.4%
In-kind donations (food)	77.8%
Monetary donations	73.0%
Grants	69.8%
Other	14.3%
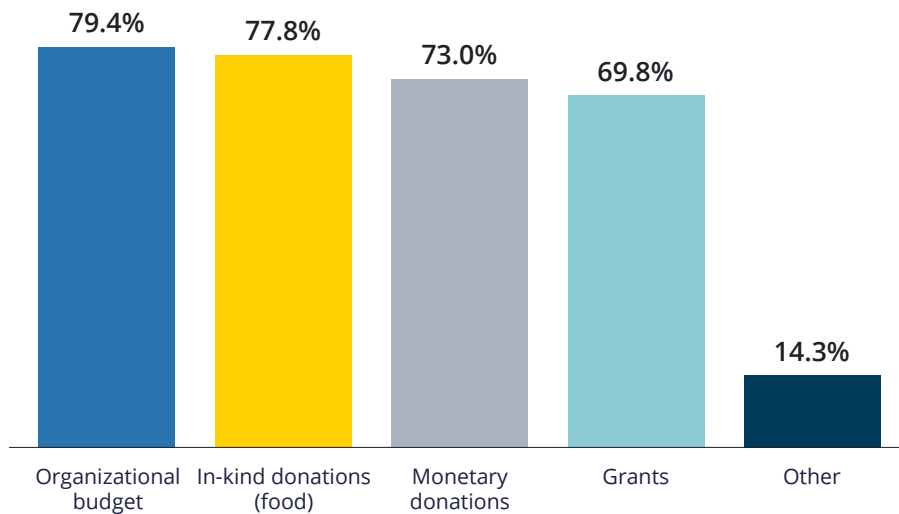
Barriers to Providing Food Directly

Among programs that did not provide food directly (eight programs), insufficient financial resources (100.0%) and inadequate facilities (87.5%) were the most common reasons for not doing so (Figure 15). Only one program indicated that they do not provide food because the youth they served had stable access to food.

Figure 15. Reasons why LGBTQ+ youth programs do not provide food

Insufficient financial resources	100.0%
Facility does not have a kitchen for on-site food preparation	87.5%
Facility does not have adequate space for food preparation or storage	62.5%
Insufficient staffing	50.0%
Youth in our program have stable food access	12.5%
Unreliable supply of donated food	12.5%
Other	12.5%

Lessons from Strategies Viewed as Most Successful

To better understand what makes an activity successful in getting food to LGBTQ+ youth, programs were asked, "Thinking about your most successful strategy, what made it successful?" and provided an opportunity to write a short response. Most responses focused on two specific strategies to get food directly to youth—meals and snacks and on-site food pantries. A third group of responses focused more generally on process aspects of programmatic success. Responses are summarized below.

Meals and Snacks

Twenty different organizations described how providing meals and snacks at their organizations was an immediate, no-barrier way to increase access to food for the youth they serve.
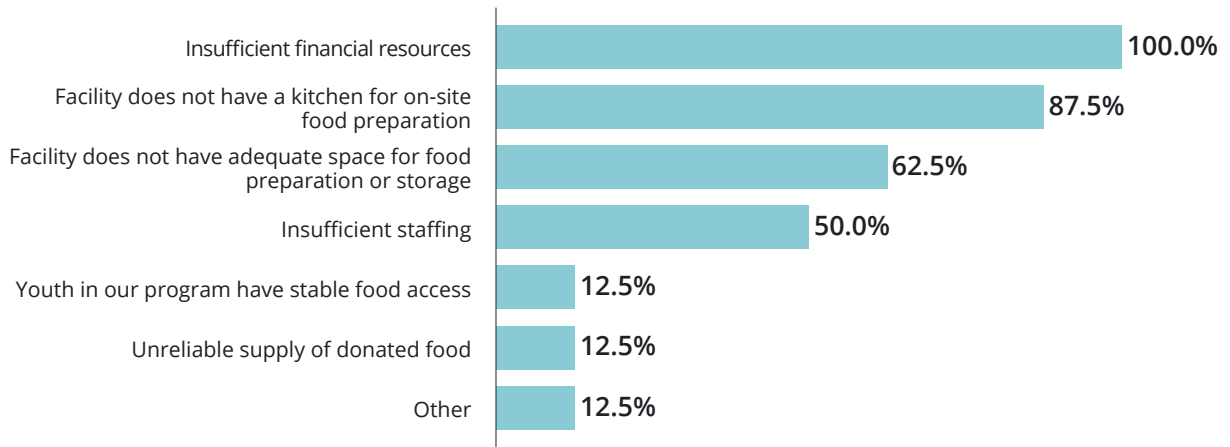
> *Having hot meals here in the youth center paired with nonperishable options to take home is the most successful. It sets young folks up to be able to participate in empowering programs at the Center and makes sure they can eat for a few days at home.*

Several programs mentioned that providing food to everyone, regardless of need, reduced stigma and shame around needing food.

> *Dinner is served to all youth regardless of need, lowering stigma of those participating in meals.*

> *Homeless youth who may not be participating in other programming know they can stop by the Center, and we'll always have sandwiches, snacks, microwave meals, and drinks available. Everybody (regardless of what they come to the Center for) is invited to help themselves to anything in the common spaces. Everyone eats free food at the Center; we don't ask for income qualification if you want a sandwich or a frozen meal.*

Some organizations felt that part of their programs' success was due to engaging youth directly in growing the food and planning and preparing meals.

> *[We have] a gardening club [where] youth learn to grow their own produce and how to make various food items with them—thus far, this has consisted of guacamole and smoothies as this is a new program from our Center.*

> *Our most successful strategy has been getting youth to come to our Center for the hot meals we*

prepare. I think the two things that are making this program successful is consistently offering the meals on consistent days of the week and involving the youth in what they want cooked through interest surveys.

Providing three hot meals every day on-site has been the most successful [strategy]. All meals are prepared through our intergenerational culinary arts program, so youth get a wide variety of healthy food and also receive cooking and job skills.

Other programs also said that providing meals and snacks in the context of other activities and programs helped to reduce stigma.

Youth felt the most comfortable just eating at events or taking snacks home to 'help' me. We experience the most success when they don't feel like they have to draw attention to themselves in order to get additional food.

We host a monthly meal night where youth [ages] 16 to 24 can come get a hot meal. What makes this monthly offering so successful is that the theme changes every month, and youth know that they are also coming to join a fun event and not just get free food. Some examples are an open mic night or karaoke night. This breaks down some of the stigma youth may have around getting free food.

Providing food directly was not only a way to meet the needs of youth experiencing food insecurity but also to build community and connections with peers and their organizations.

Youth bond over a shared meal. Youth come from school usually and are hungry at group and look forward to the food we have. We have an air fryer where we make hot foods available for [the] group.

Through a grant, we are able to provide dinner (usually hot) on Fridays when the youth group meets. The youth provide marketing for us through word of mouth, which is how we gain more youth in our program!

Snacks directly impact the sustainability of our work. Feeding people meets a need, but it also contributes to a welcoming environment. This is one of the ways we are able to demonstrate community care.

On-Site Food Pantries

Nine organizations described on-site food pantries as one of their most successful strategies to increase access to food for LGBTQ+ youth. Immediate access, no or low eligibility requirements, a chance to engage in other services and activities, and a shame-free way to obtain food support were the most articulated strengths of this activity.

Providing food and having a food pantry at our organization is the most successful because it allows youth to access food at the same time they come to our organization for other resources and services. They don't need to travel anywhere else; they can just get food right from us!

Youth hav[e] access to food pantry on days where the other youth activities are happening. More youth utilized the food pantry without shame or embarrassment.

With the food bank, we can also directly provide several days' worth of groceries for youth to take home. This is successful because youth already know us. There is less an element of shame than in other places.

> *Folks do have to sign up if they want weekly groceries, but again, there is no proof of income, and the barriers are fairly low.*

Some programs felt the success of their programs was due, in part, to allowing youth to play an active role in their pantries.

> *We allow our youth to get involved. Specifically with things like restocking our pantry and organizing products. This helped with removing a lot of the stigma around accessing pantry foods and sharing with friends.*

> *We utilize a "choice" method, which allows individuals to select the food or hygiene items that make the most sense for them and their taste/preferences and nutritional needs. We just limit access to one bag of food/hygiene items weekly.*

Some programs felt part of the success of their food pantry was providing delivery to overcome transportation obstacles.

> *We host a monthly food pantry service, but to make it more accessible, we began offering delivery directly to where our clients live to address the transportation barriers to attending our events.*

> *We are the only food bank in our area that prioritizes folks in the LGBTQIA+ community and those with disabilities. We are also one of the few programs that provide delivery.*

One program discussed how providing food helped bring youth into their organization and was embedded in their organizational culture.

> *Our food programs feel like an extension of everything we are doing—not just a place where people come for free food (though that is fine, too). Often, people who find out about us because of our food bank end up participating in our other programs, and clients who already know us end up using the food bank. A lot of our food-insecure clients already know us. They are already coming to us for support or to socialize, so the barriers are low. We've had people say it feels like getting food from a relative when you are having a hard time.*

Other Considerations

Twenty-four programs shared various perspectives about how to successfully increase access to food for LGBTQ+ youth. These process-oriented strategies included reducing barriers to access, engaging youth in programs, collaborating with external partners, having adequate funding and staffing, and providing services with kindness.

- **Reducing barriers to access.** Several programs reported that removing barriers, such as transportation, eligibility criteria, and applications, enabled their success. In the words of one program staff, "We believe people when they say they need food assistance. We do not require any proof of need." Another felt that their most successful strategy was "providing multiple programs or services on the same day/in the same space."

- **Engaging youth.** Youth engagement was also highlighted by another program staff: "Our most successful strategy has been hiring youth with lived experience to advertise and manage the program." Another staff member said, "We are able to get the youth involved in deciding what food items we order. The days we discuss what we want to order give us the opportunity to see what the needs are."

- **Collaborating with external partners.** One program described its most successful strategy as "leveraging partnership with a food rescue organization to deliver boxes to homes—an effort we began during COVID. We also take youth to this organization for classes. Leaning into mutual expertise has made both orgs more successful in improving food access." Another program highlighted partnerships as a key ingredient of their success: "From a sustainability/operational perspective, our most successful strategies include engaging local partners such as school districts and pantries.

- **Having adequate funding and staffing.** While one program staff explained that "funding that enabled us to hire a pantry coordinator" was central to their success, staff at another organization described consistent funding as essential to providing a reliable supply of snacks: "In the past, our snack closet was hit or miss as it was solely based off of donations or our annual budget. A few years ago, [a company] came in and pledged a monthly stipend for our food pantry. This has seriously helped us have consistency in our snack closet."

- **Organizational culture.** The importance of building relationships with youth, including treating youth with "kindness," was mentioned by a few programs. As one staff described, "Our drop-in program has continued to grow. Youth report that they enjoy our staff because we are kind and value their needs." Another program staff explained that providing food "made it easier to develop a rapport with them [the youth] to get assistance with other services."

Lessons from Strategies Viewed as Less Successful

To learn from less successful program efforts, programs were asked, "Thinking about your two least successful strategies, why didn't these strategies work?" and provided an opportunity to write a response. Some programs offered perspectives on strategies that their programs were not using. Responses are summarized here by strategies.

Food Pantry Referrals

Seven organizations identified referrals to food pantries as among their least successful strategies to increase access to food for LGBTQ+ youth. Barriers included transportation, safety, and concerns that food pantries were adult-focused resources.

> *Youth who were given other food bank information did not utilize those services. The main reasons were that food banks were at religious-based organizations, hours were too early, youth did not have documentation to meet requirements, and lack of transportation.*

> *Referring youth to food pantries was least successful because there isn't enough accessible public transportation for them to get to them. The same goes for providing transportation to grocery stores and other food programs. We provide bus passes to youth, but public transportation isn't consistent or reliable enough.*

On-Site Food Pantries

Four organizations described challenges in offering on-site pantries or food resources—including funding.

> *We had a goal to increase access to food similar to a food pantry, but then our daily average more than doubled without double the funding. Our funding had to be reallocated to feeding the youth we see during programs rather than focusing on sending food outside the building.*

> *Shelf-stable food that requires many steps in cooking was our least successful strategy. Most youth either don't have access to a place to cook or don't have the desire to gain the skills for cooking.*

Shopping and Cooking Classes

Five organizations shared experiences offering cooking or shopping classes and articulated challenges, including sustaining cooking supplies and inadequate organizational funding.

> *Offering cooking classes was successful for a small amount of time because resources depleted. It is harder to sustain this kind of program without steady resources for food.*

Other organizations mentioned low interest among youth in cooking and shopping classes.

> *The cooking classes were difficult to manage and did not draw attendance, both in-person and online.*

> *In the initial year of receiving a grant to help fund our food bank, the proposal included holding regular cooking classes using ingredients that we commonly had access to in the food bank. We tried to do this virtually after the pandemic started, but we just found that people weren't interested. So much about cooking is situational—whether you have access to a kitchen, culture, habits, etc. We found that people generally know what they like and what they are going to eat. So, we scratched the cooking classes in following years.*

Other organizations emphasized that many youth lack the financial resources to use what they learned in shopping and cooking classes.

> *I see cooking and shopping classes as possible great strategies for long-term improvements, but if participants don't have enough money to buy food in the first place, it would not help them accessing food in the short term.*

> *Youth just need access to food; they often do not need support in physically picking it out or making it but need the funds to be able to obtain it in the first place. The obstacle is often not how to cook it or get what you need, it's how to pay for what is needed in the first place.*

Cash Aid

Of the five programs that discussed providing cash assistance for food in response to the open-ended question, four indicated that cash aid did not result in access to nutritionally adequate meals—either because "cash often got prioritized for other needs youth deemed more important so food took a back seat" or because "the youth would run out of food quickly with the items they would buy because they weren't planning/cooking complete meals." One program indicated that it lacked an effective way to track how funds were utilized. Two programs offered that they could not grant participants cash aid due to organizational policies.

Public Benefits

Four programs noted challenges in providing information about or help enrolling in government assistance programs, including that the programs did not provide enough assistance and were difficult to enroll in and qualify for.

> *Local government benefits are not enough to allow people to afford food along with their other bills.*

> *Florida SNAP benefits are really hard to access and when folks do qualify, it's not enough money to actually survive.*

> *The majority of our students are under their parents' taxes and, therefore, not able to qualify for their own benefits.*

> *I think they worked on a case-by-case individual level. However, they didn't have major impact due to lack of capacity and the difficulty to know if youth followed up with the government assistance programs.*

Transportation Assistance

Staff from seven programs described offering transportation assistance as a "huge challenge" or identified distance and limited public transportation as a barrier to connecting LGBTQ+ youth with resources.

> *[Offering transportation assistance was] not sustainable as the majority of our community members would need weekly transportation forever in order to keep accessing food.*

> *Nebraska does not have a reliable, widely accessible public transportation system in our municipalities. Most unhoused youth are typically living out of a car with a friend, or if they are without a car, are only able to reliably access food and other support systems near their geographical location. We are located on a bus route, but limited utility and difficulty of access can be a challenge for youth.*

> *We support a large 26-county area of our state. That means many people cannot get to our location.*

RESOURCES TO INCREASE LGBTQ+ YOUTH PROGRAMS' SERVICE CAPACITY

All programs were asked to identify resources that would aid them in increasing their capacity to provide food to youth (Figure 16). The top three resources selected were flexible funding (61.6%), partnerships with local businesses (57.5%), and funding from local, state, or federal government (53.4%). Foundation grants, in-kind donations, and monetary donations were the next most frequently endorsed resources.

Figure 16. Resources that could increase program capacity to feed youth by LGBTQ+ youth programs

Resource	Percentage
Flexible funding	61.6%
Partnerships with local business to build a sustainable food supply	57.5%
Funding from local, state, or federal government	53.4%
Foundation grants	46.6%
In-kind donations (food)	43.8%
Monetary donations	43.8%
Better infrastructure (new warehouse, better cold storage, new packing equipment)	39.7%
Partnerships with local food pantries	38.4%
Volunteers	37.0%
More staff	28.8%
Legal support	6.8%

BROADER CHANGES NEEDED TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY

Finally, all programs were asked what broader changes would improve access to food for the LGBTQ+ youth served by their organizations (Figure 17). Staff overwhelmingly prioritized housing support as a means to improve access to food for LGBTQ+ youth. Specifically, the top three selected broader changes were increasing youth housing (transitional/long-term support) (76.7%), increasing affordable housing (57.5%), and increasing access to housing vouchers for youth ages 18 to 25 (54.8%). In addition, many programs indicated that increasing the minimum wage, changing SNAP eligibility criteria, and providing free or discounted transit passes would improve access to food for LGBTQ+ youth served by their organizations.

Figure 17. Broader changes that would increase access to food for LGBTQ+ youth

Change	Percentage
Increase youth housing (transitional/long-term support)	76.7%
Increase the amount of affordable housing	57.5%
Increase availability and access to housing vouchers for youth ages 18-25	54.8%
Increase the minimum wage	50.7%
Change eligibility criteria for SNAP	42.5%
Free metro or discounted transit passes	41.1%
Change identity document laws	30.1%
Employment development or workforce programs	20.5%
Change application or recertification process for SNAP	19.2%
Other	5.5%

DISCUSSION

The LGBTQ+ youth organizations that participated in this study were connected to youth experiencing food insufficiency and were engaged in activities to feed youth—directly or through referrals. This finding is consistent with a 2019 needs assessment survey of LGBTQ+ youth centers and programs conducted by CenterLink.[1] Programs shared a wealth of knowledge about strategies that worked at their organizations, as well as those that were less successful. On-site meals, snacks, prepackaged foods, and gift cards for grocery stores or restaurant meals were far more convenient and immediate than skills-oriented programming (e.g., cooking classes). Support strategies that aligned with the multi-faceted needs of youth, who were often also navigating housing instability, were the most successful, whereas those that required time and travel (i.e., referrals to off-site food pantries) or administrative hurdles (e.g., SNAP enrollment) were less successful.

Importantly, the LGBTQ+ youth organizations participating in this study recognized the interconnectedness between food and relationships. Food is a way to come together and build relationships and community, not just a basic need to meet. Making food available to all youth and engaging youth in planning and running food-oriented programming were strategies used to reduce shame about needing food. Further, offering food on-site also allowed programs to establish trust and connections with youth and to link them to other services and resources.

It is important to note that LGBTQ+ youth programs that view food insecurity as a problem may have been more motivated to participate in this study and that larger, more established programs may have had greater capacity to complete our survey. Therefore, our findings may not be generalizable to all LGBTQ+ youth programs. Another consideration is that our study focused on access to food, in general, and did not explore access to a nutritionally adequate diet. Future research should explore the types of foods available to LGBTQ+ youth and strategies to ensure access to fresh produce and unprocessed foods (e.g., community garden programs, SNAP rewards for purchases at farmer's markets coupled with online or telephone-based SNAP Navigator programs to facilitate enrollment). With these caveats in mind, this study was the first to explore LGBTQ+ youth programs as a vehicle to increase access to food for LGBTQ+ youth—with attention to program ingenuity and experience. We also identified 73 LGBTQ+ youth programs across the mainland U.S. that could be further engaged to increase food access for LGBTQ+ youth and to evaluate promising practices identified through this research.

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[1] Williams, N. D., Levine, D., & Fish, J. N. (2019). *2019 Needs Assessment: LGBTQ+ Youth Centers and Programs.* CenterLink, Fort Lauderdale, FL. https://www.lgbtqcenters.org/Assets/Images/PageContent/Full/2019-needs-assessment-lgbtq-youth-centers-and-programs.pdf

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RESEARCH THAT MATTERS

APPENDIX

METHODS

The data presented in this report were gathered in August and September 2023 using an online survey completed by program staff working at LGBTQ+ youth-serving community-based organizations in the U.S. The survey was developed with LGBTQ+ youth-serving organizations and individuals who work in food policy and charitable food resources to learn what LGBTQ+ youth organizations are doing to feed LGBTQ+ youth—including programmatic perspectives on what's worked, what hasn't worked and why, as well as to identify strategies to improve food access for LGBTQ+ youth. The brief online survey included both closed- and open-ended questions, was hosted on Qualtrics, and distributed to 332 organizations in the CenterLink network of LGBTQ+ community centers, including about 270 with LGBTQ+ youth programs and 56 LGBTQ+ youth programs identified through a targeted internet search. Participating organizations were offered opportunities to win $100 and $250 raffle prizes (Tremendous gift cards).

To identify LGBTQ+ youth programs that might not belong to the CenterLink network, we conducted a state-by-state Google search for LGBTQ+ youth programs. From there, we screened for organizations eligible for this study based upon review of the organizational website and using the criteria listed below:

- The website events page was up to date, and information was easily accessible through the website or applicable social media.

- The organization's mission and vision page listed two or more of the following terms: resources, social supports, social services, community outreach, policy, advocacy, justice, racial equity, and equity.

- The organization provided services or significant resources to LGBTQ+ youth (e.g., HIV/STI testing services, legal counseling or name change counseling, social services referrals, job training, computer labs, support groups, or tutoring).

A total of 59 Centerlink program staff completed surveys, as did 18 staff at the internet-identified programs. After removing four duplicate programs, the combined sample included 73 programs. About three-quarters of staff respondents were program managers or directors. Two-thirds of staff respondents had been at the organization for two or more years.

TABLE

Table 1. LGBTQ+ youth organization survey findings (n=73)

	n*	%#
ALL PROGRAMS WERE ASKED THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS		
What percentage of LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization did not always have enough to eat in the past 7 days? Please make your best estimate.	72	
Less than 5%	7	9.7
5-10%	12	16.7
11-20%	17	23.6
21-30%	13	18.1
More than 30%	23	31.9
Are there groups of LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization that more commonly report that they do not have enough food to eat? Check all that apply.	73	
Transgender, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming youth	50	68.5
18–25-year-old youth	50	68.5
Black youth	36	49.3
Latinx youth	35	47.9
Youth under the age of 18	19	26.0
White youth	14	19.2
No, not having enough to eat is experienced evenly by all groups of LGBTQ+ youth that we serve	12	16.4
American Indian and Alaska Native youth	7	9.6
Asian youth	6	8.2
Cisgender boys	6	8.2
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander youth	6	8.2
Middle Eastern and North African youth	5	6.8
Cisgender girls	2	2.7
How do the LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization typically access food? Mark Yes, No, or Unsure for each statement. Yes responses are presented.	73	
Community-based organizations (including yours), food pantries and food kitchens	67	91.8
Chosen family or friends	60	82.2
School, such as school lunches	53	72.6
Self-pay, though employment (wages)	47	64.4
Family of origin/household	44	60.3
Self, through informal/street economies (ex. sex work, drug trade, or other nontraditional exchanges)	41	56.2
Other	13	17.8

	n*	%#
Why do LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization not have adequate access to food? Please select the top three reasons.	73	
Unstable housing	62	84.9
Lack of access to jobs that pay livable wages	52	71.2
Family is struggling with food insecurity	50	68.5
Family won't support the youth	46	63.0
Unreliable transportation or other transportation barriers	35	47.9
Inability to get to a store to prepare food	20	27.4
Harassment at places that provide food (food panties or meal programs)	12	16.4
Harassment at school impedes ability to access school-based meals	11	15.1
Lack of time to get to places that provide food during operating hours	7	9.6
Other	2	2.7
Does your organization provide food or food related referrals to LGBTQ+ youth? Select one.	70	
Yes, as a regular part of our programming	19	27.1
Yes, sometimes, for events and special occasions	4	5.7
Yes, we make referrals for food support (such as food pantries or to a public office for SNAP enrollment)	8	11.4
All of the above	39	55.7
PROGRAMS THAT ONLY PROVIDED FOOD REFERRALS WERE SKIPPED OUT OF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS		
How does your organization provide food support and resources to LGBTQ+ youth? Check all that apply.	65	
Food (staples or prepackaged) to take home	65	100.0
Snacks are provided at our organization	63	96.9
Hot meals are served at our organization	35	53.8
Delivery of food to youth where they live	18	27.7
Other	11	16.9
Drop-offs at community fridges	6	9.2
How often can the LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization access food at your organization? Select one.	64	
Daily	27	42.2
2-3 times a week	15	23.4
Once a week	11	17.2
2-3 times per month	2	3.1
It varies on a case-by-case basis	9	14.1

	n*	%#
Where does your organization get the food provided to LGBTQ+ youth from? Select Yes, No, or Unsure for each statement. Yes responses are presented.	64	
We purchase it from retailers(grocery stores, Wholesale Clubs like Costco or Sam's Club, other retailers)	60	93.8
In-kind donations	50	78.1
We get it from our local food bank/ food pantry	31	50.8
We get it from restaurants	27	44.3
We purchase it from wholesalers (grocery wholesale, restaurant wholesale, food distributors like Sysco or US Foods)	17	27.0
We receive "rescued" food from local businesses	12	19.0
We grow or receive food from a community garden/farm	10	16.4
If your organization provides food to LGBTQ+ youth, what resources are used to support the youth food program? Check all that apply.	63	
Organizational budget	50	79.4
In-kind donations (food)	49	77.8
Monetary donations	46	73.0
Grants	44	69.8
Other	9	14.3
What strategies has your organization ever used to increase access to food for LGBTQ+ youth? Check all that apply.	62	
Providing food (meals or snacks) at our organization	59	95.2
Sharing information about local food pantries or meal programs	56	90.3
Offering a food pantry (including to-go prepacked food) at our organization	45	72.6
Providing gift cards to stores that sell groceries or to restaurants	41	66.1
Providing eligibility counseling or enrollment assistance for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Benefits (SNAP, formally known as food stamps) or WIC	35	56.5
Providing enrollment assistance with other government benefits	31	50.0
Offering cooking classes to teach youth how to prepare meals	27	43.5
Providing transportation to grocery stores or food programs	27	43.5
Giving direct cash aid to youth so they can buy their own food	18	29.0
Offering shopping classes (grocery store or food pantry)	7	11.3
Other	2	3.2
Of the strategies your organization used to increase food access for LGBTQ+ youth, how does your organization define success? Select all that apply.	62	
Increased overall number of youth who had access to food	53	85.5
Benefited vulnerable youth the most	43	69.4
Increased number of new youth engaging in the program	39	62.9
Positive community buy-in	25	40.3
Program duration/sustainability	25	40.3
Filled gap in local service landscape (ex. community fridge or community garden)	24	38.7
Popularity	13	21.0

	n*	%#
What are the top three most successful strategies your organization has ever used to increase access to food for LGBTQ+ youth? Please select three.	62	
Note: Percentages reflect success among organizations that ever tried a particular strategy		
Providing food (meals or snacks) at our organization	54	91.5
Offering a food pantry (including to-go prepacked food) at our organization	36	80.0
Providing gift cards to stores that sell groceries or to restaurants	25	61.0
Giving direct cash aid to youth so they can buy their own food	9	50.0
Sharing information about local food pantries or meal programs	19	33.9
Providing eligibility counseling or enrollment assistance for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Benefits (SNAP, formally known as food stamps) or WIC	10	28.6
Offering cooking classes to teach youth how to prepare meals	7	25.9
Providing enrollment assistance with other government benefits	6	19.4
Providing transportation to grocery stores or food programs	3	11.1
PROGRAMS THAT ONLY DID FOOD REFERRALS WERE ASKED THE FOLLOWING QUESTION		
Why doesn't your organization provide food? Check all that apply.	8	
Insufficient financial resources	8	100.0
Facility does not have a kitchen for onsite food preparation	7	87.5
Facility does not have adequate space for food preparation or storage	5	62.5
Insufficient staffing	4	50.0
Youth in our program have stable food access	1	12.5
Unreliable supply of donated food	1	12.5
Other	1	12.5
ALL PROGRAMS WERE ASKED THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS		
Are there resources that would improve your organization's ability to provide food to LGBTQ+ youth? Select the top three resources that would assist your program.	73	
Flexible funding	45	61.6
Partnerships with local business to build a sustainable food supply	42	57.5
Funding from local, state, or federal government	39	53.4
Foundation grants	34	46.6
In-kind donations (food)	32	43.8
Monetary donations	32	43.8
Better infrastructure (new warehouse, better cold storage, new packing equipment	29	39.7
Partnerships with local food pantries	28	38.4
Volunteers	27	37.0
More staff	21	28.8
Legal support	5	6.8

	n*	%#
What broader changes would improve access to food for LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization? Select the top three changes.	73	
Increase youth housing (transitional/long-term support)	56	76.7
Increase the amount of affordable housing	42	57.5
Increase availability and access to housing vouchers for youth ages 18-25	40	54.8
Increase the minimum wage	37	50.7
Change eligibility criteria for SNAP	31	42.5
Free metro or discounted transit passes	30	41.1
Change identity document laws	22	30.1
Employment development or workforce programs	15	20.5
Change application or recertification process for SNAP	14	19.2
Other	4	5.5
What is your organization type? Select one.	72	
LGBTQ+ community center (in the YouthLink/CenterLink network)	51	70.8
Independent LGBTQ+ youth programs	10	13.9
LGBTQ+ youth program connected to a larger organization	7	9.7
Other, please specify	3	4.2
Youth program - not LGBTQ+ specific	1	1.4
What region is your organization located in? Select one.	73	
West	24	32.9
South	17	23.3
Northeast	17	23.3
Midwest	15	20.5
In what type of area is your organization located? Select one.	73	
Urban area	44	60.3
Suburban area	21	28.8
Rural area	8	11.0
What is the youngest age of LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization? Select one.	69	
12 and under	31	44.9
14 to 18	14	20.3
What is the oldest age of LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization? Select one.	70	
20 to 23	5	7.1
24	21	30.0
25	17	24.3
Over 25	27	38.6
What percentage of LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization are under the age of 18? Select one.	68	
Less than 25% are under the age of 18	22	32.4
25-50% are under the age of 18	21	30.9
51-75% are under the age of 18	16	23.5
More than 75% are under the age of 18	9	13.2

	n*	%#
What percentage of the LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization are Youth of Color? (By Youth of Color, we mean Black, Latinx, American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern) Select one.	68	
Less than 25% are youth of color	15	22.1
25-50% are youth of color	31	45.6
51-75% are youth of color	8	11.8
More than 75% are youth of color	14	20.6
What percentage of LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization are unstably housed? By unstably housed we mean couch surfing, living in a car, park or other public place, living in a shelter, group home or congregate residence, or living at a friend or relative's place. Select one.	67	
Less than 5% are unstably housed	3	4.5
5-10% are unstably housed	15	22.4
11-20% are unstably housed	14	20.9
21-30% are unstably housed	19	28.4
More than 30% are unstably housed	16	23.9
What percentage of LGBTQ+ youth served by your organization are engaged in sex work to meet their basic needs (ex. food, shelter, etc.)? Select one.	73	
Less than 5% are engaged in the sex work	12	16.4
5-10% are engaged in sex work	11	15.1
11-20% are engaged in sex work	13	17.8
21-30% are engaged in sex work	3	4.1
More than 30% are engaged in sex work	1	1.4
Don't know	33	45.2
Does your organization have any eligibility requirements for LGBTQ+ youth to use your services? Select one.	72	
No	63	87.5
Yes	9	12.5
If yes, what are the eligibility requirements for LGBTQ+ youth? Check all that apply.	9	
Age requirements	8	88.9
Other	2	22.2
Residency or income verifications (example requiring an ID or proof of income)	1	11.1
What is your role at the organization? Select one.	72	
Program director or manager	52	72.2
Staff	13	18.1
Other	5	6.9
Volunteer	2	2.8
How long have you been with the organization? Select one.	73	
Less than a year	7	9.6
1-2 years	16	21.9
2-4 years	16	21.9
5 years or more	34	46.6

*Counts correspond to the number of times a response was endorsed. Response totals may not sum to 73 programs if a program respondent skipped the question, if the question asked respondents to "check all that apply," or if the question asked the respondent to select multiple responses (i.e., the "top three"). In addition, programs that only provided food referrals were skipped out of some questions (noted in table above). The number of program respondents who answered a question is noted next to each question. We also note that when asked to select their top three responses, some program respondents selected more than three, and some selected less than three. Therefore, the total number of responses for "top three" questions will not equal exactly three times the number of question respondents.

#Column percentages will total 100% (give or take small rounding differences) for questions that asked respondents to select one response. For "check all that apply" or "top three" questions, percentages correspond to the proportion of respondents who endorsed a particular response option.