

Good morning fellow scholars and professors. My name is Sydney Inger. I am a sophomore at James Madison University majoring in Independent Scholars and minoring in Honors Interdisciplinary Studies, Family Studies, and Art. Independent Scholars is a design-your-own individualized major. I am pursuing coursework, independent research, and experiential learning related to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, plus (LGBTQIAP+) youth.

LGBTQIAP+ young people face undeniable inequalities. I am here to talk to you today about some of the intersecting identities that can influence barriers and hardships that LGBTQIAP+ youth may encounter. Many of them face adversities such as homelessness, foster care, and early encounters with the juvenile justice system. Sometimes, these young people encounter these difficult situations because of family rejection. The purpose of my talk is to help you think about how you can have a positive impact on LGBTQIAP+ youth problems as an ally or as someone who is part of the community.

Because we are teenagers or early twenty-somethings, we may not always see eye-to-eye with our parents. Professors, you know this well. Difficulties with communication may be compounded for LGBTQIAP+ youth. Far too often, LGBTQIAP+ youth experience rejection by their families. I have been researching memoirs of LGBTQIAP+ youth. From this research I have learned that religion and geographic location are common factors in LGBTQIAP+ youth rejection. They are not the only factors, and they are not universals. There are many LGBTQIAP+ youth who have accepting and affirming families. Some youth choose not to come out. Some are out only to their friends and not to their families out of fear of rejection.

But the reality is that LGBTQIAP+ youth disproportionately experience rejection due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. And that rejection is correlated with religion and geographic location.

While not everyone in the Midwest is LGBTQIAP+ intolerant, the states in the middle part of our country tend to have more conservative religious beliefs. This translates into less familial acceptance for LGBTQIAP+ children. Religion plays a significant role in many LGBTQIAP+ youth coming out stories. In happy ending stories like those of Garrard Conley and Alex Cooper – two young people sent by their families to participate in harmful conversion therapy. Conversion therapy efforts often try to change youth’s identities by inflicting physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. In only 20 states, are there protections for minors being forced to attend or reside in conversion therapy institutions. There is a distinct pattern, reflecting that the South including Texas, most of the Midwest excluding the state of Illinois, and the Upper Great Plains have not set any restrictions on sending youth to conversion therapy. Additionally, the bottom of what is known as the Bible Belt is said to be the most conservative religious part of the country. The Buckle of the Bible Belt consists of the South and the Mid-South which typically are not in favor of the “lifestyle” of members of the LGBTQIAP+ community. In conjunction, the Upper Midwest tends to be populated with individuals and families who practice religions such as Protestantism and Catholicism, which also tend to be on the more conservative side. The South, excluding Florida, does not have pending legislation protecting youth from this harmful practice. However, many states in the Midwest, including Texas, have pending legislation to outlaw conversion therapy for minors. Thankfully, most LGBTQIAP+ youth become strong survivors, become advocates for change, and even reconcile with their families. In other memoirs, LGBTQIAP+ youth are not so fortunate. Many youths

from conservative religious backgrounds are cut off from their families and thrown on the streets.

I want to shift people's perspectives. I want people to think differently about LGBTQIAP+ youth. Imagine this:

A house filled with unconditional love and laughter. A child thriving mentally, physically, academically, and emotionally. Food is always on the table after the parents come home from a day at work.

Sounds lovely, right? Everyone seems happy, healthy, and loved right? What if I told you I was describing a same-sex couple with a child? Again, everyone in the house is happy, healthy, and unconditionally loved. So why does it matter what gender the parents choose to love?

Many times as a result of familial rejection, LGBTQIAP+ youth experience homelessness. This could involve sleeping on the streets, couch surfing from place to place, or sleeping in shelters. Would you leave your own scared child on the streets on a cold, wet night? Did you know that young people found sleeping in public places are subject to incarceration by the juvenile justice system or entry into the child welfare system?

LGBTQIAP+ youth are disproportionately represented within the social welfare system, and the numbers of such youth are rising swiftly. LGBTQIAP+ youth can find themselves in foster care when parents relinquish their rights and make their kids homeless. In such cases, young people are eligible for adoption and go straight into placements that may involve short-term housing, long-term shelter arrangements, foster-to-adopt housing, or group homes. Many of these young people will experience hardships related to these placements. Approximately 78% of

LGBTQIAP+ youth have been removed from, or run away from, their last placement because of hostility or violence related to sexual orientation or gender identity.

Sadly, there are few repercussions for foster families who victimize their foster children. In placements, some youth may experience abuse and neglect as a result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity based on the religious views of the home. Additionally, youth may be subjected to unnecessary therapy, such as conversion therapy. Only 21 states have laws protecting LGBTQIAP+ youth from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Only three states protect LGBTQIAP+ youth from being discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation alone. Again, the pattern reflects that most of the Midwest does not have explicit protections for LGBTQIAP+ youth. How can we do better in those other states that have no protections? How can we do better as a nation to create change? How can we increase protections for LGBTQIAP+ youth?

We can start by educating those around us. Now, I am not trying to change your views. I am simply asking you to look at it from a different perspective. Would it be possible for you to treat others, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, with respect? If you can answer with a yes, then I challenge you to think about all of the young people who have been thrown out of their homes simply because of their core identity. These young people deserve a family, just as all of you do.

Minors who commit a status offense, whether in the custody of their parents or while homeless, may be subjected to time in the juvenile justice system. A status offense is a noncriminal act, but is considered a legal violation because the youth is a minor. Truancy, running away, loitering, and soliciting are all considered status offenses. They are also common violations committed by LGBTQIAP+ youth. Truancy may result from bullying. However,

bullying is not the sole reason a youth may commit truancy and bullying may not be a factor at all. In the case of bullying, parents have the option to seek help from the school district or a judge. To alleviate the bullying, the child may have the option of being home schooled. A child who runs away from an unsafe home can actually be further punished by being put into a juvenile detention center. Why are we encouraging a system which is built on the premise of family preservation and rehabilitation that punishment of the child is the solution to the oppressive mindset of the parents? In this case, services such as family therapy could be mandated by the court. In such family therapy sessions, LGBTQIAP+ youth as well as parents talk about sexual orientation and gender identity in a safe space while also talking about each other's needs. This proven practice can be very effective in reducing the number of LGBTQIAP+ youth who enter foster care or the juvenile justice system.

LGBTQIAP+ youth may also enter the system through solicitation or loitering – by sleeping on a park bench, in a laundromat, or in other public places. This happens when young people are thrown out of their homes or run away due to lack of safety. LGBTQIAP+ youth are disproportionally represented on the streets, encompassing of approximately 40-60% percent of the homeless youth population. What steps can we take as a community to help this issue? On a small scale, we can encourage and embrace diversity. On a larger scale, we can look to our LGBTQIAP+ leaders and politicians to allocate money towards aiding communities in providing housing for displaced LGBTQIAP+ youth. Housing is a basic human need. LGBTQIAP+ youth need a warm, safe, accepting, and affirming place to sleep at night. We as a community can work together and strive to provide them with such facilities.

Throughout this speech I have discussed the effects of familial rejection on LGBTQIAP+ youth. Every single child, regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identity, deserves a

home and an accepting and affirming family. During this global pandemic, LGBTQIAP+ youth can feel isolated, scared, left without a place to call home, without food, or on the streets. We need to come together and help the LGBTQIAP+ youth community. Thank you for listening.

Common Questions about LGBTQIAP+ youth and family rejection:

What are some of the repercussions of foster care?

Some children experience mental health problems as a result of entering the foster care system. For example, they may experience anxiety, depression, or lowered self-esteem and self-efficacy. Additionally, some youth may experience PTSD from leaving their birth home or moving between foster homes. In some cases, youth can present signs of suicidal ideation. However, in most cases, children who enter the foster care system have the potential for finding forever homes that shower them with unconditional love and acceptance.

How long can young people be in foster care until parental rights are terminated?

The number of months varies by state. In Virginia, according to Code 16.1-283 parents who have not made or are unwilling to make reasonable efforts within a period of time, not to exceed 12 months since the child entered foster care system for the first time, will have their parental rights terminated. However, if within the 12-month period the parent does regain custody, they are subjected to home visits by the department of social services child welfare agency.

How long may young people be incarcerated for a status offense?

The answer to this is not simple, varying on a state-by-state and case-by-case basis. For example, a judge may require the minor to pay a fine, order them to go through counseling services, make them to live in a foster home or a group home, or give them jail time depending on the severity

of the offense. If a minor violates a court order mandating them to attend services or programs listed above, they may be detained.

How are family therapy sessions effective?

Family therapy sessions can help a family stay together and become stronger in many ways. By setting boundaries with a professional's help, families can have a structured rule stating that sexual orientation and/or gender identity cannot be discussed except in the office with agreed upon exceptions. Sessions can help families learn how to listen to one another and understand each other's wants and needs in these particular relationships.

What can I do in my own community?

If you are not already an ally – become one. Educate yourself. Read some articles or ask experts questions. In your community set up safe spaces for all people. Display diverse and inclusive items or pictures in public spaces. If you are a professor, something as simple as a rainbow flag in your office can make students feel safe. Little things go a long way.