

LGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Nova Scotia: A Call to Action

Gabriel Enxuga, Rhys Alden, and Jace Miller

The Youth Project

A note on language:

In this report, we use the acronym LGBTQ+ as an umbrella term to refer to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and who do not identify as cisgender and/or heterosexual. We will also use the shorthand “queer and trans” to refer to the wider LGBTQ+ community. We include the + at the end to indicate that LGBTQ is not a complete list. Rather, the + attempts to be an expansive definition that includes other identifies that are not specifically mentioned, such as people who identify as pansexual, asexual, genderqueer, non-binary, or two spirit. As well, this report also uses “they” as a singular pronoun.

Introduction

We know that LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented among youth experiencing homelessness (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Leeuwan et al., 2006; Kidd, Gaetz, & O’Grady, 2017). However, little research has been done on the needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness in Nova Scotia. The goal of this report is to review the available literature, present the findings from qualitative interviews conducted with queer and trans youth experiencing homelessness, and hear from youth themselves about what needs to change. In preparing this research, a review of available literature on the experiences of queer and trans youth experiencing homelessness was conducted. We searched Social Work Abstracts, Psych INO, Psych ARTICLES, and Gender Studies Databases with the search terms “LGBTQ” “youth” and “homelessness”. Our search returned 33 hits. We excluded articles that were not research studies, such as literature reviews and policy recommendations.

The majority of the available research on LGBTQ+ youth and homelessness is American. I was able to locate three Canadian research studies. Two were qualitative research studies conducted by Dr. Abramovich with LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto

(Abramovich, 2013; Abramovich, 2016). The third was a secondary analysis of data collected from the 2015 National Canadian Homelessness Youth Survey (Kidd et al., 2017). This was the only research on LGBTQ+ youth and homelessness that included data from Nova Scotia. This survey was administered through 57 Canadian agencies in 42 communities. Overall, they found that 28% of youth experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ (Kidd et al., 2017).

In Nova Scotia, 33.3% of participants identified as LGBTQ (Kidd et al., 2017). Although it is difficult to find reliable statistics on the number of LGBTQ+ people in Canada, according to the Canadian Community Health Survey (Statistics Canada, 2014), about 3% of Canadians aged 18 – 59 identify as lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB). Although this is probably a low estimate due to under-reporting, if we take this number to be accurate, then we can clearly see that if 33.3% of youth experiencing homelessness in Nova Scotia identify as LGBT, then they are extremely over-represented. Alarming, among LGBTQ experiencing homelessness, almost 3 out of 4 (70%) reported attempting suicide at some point in their lifetime (Kidd et al., 2017). And this number was almost twice as high for LGBTQ identified youth when compared with cisgender and heterosexual youth (70% vs. 39%) (Kidd et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, these statistics are consistent. A study conducted in Seattle approximately 20 years ago, from 1995 – 1998, found that out of 375 youth, 22% (n = 84) identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and only 1 participant identified as transgender. (Cochran et al., 2002). This study also found that LGB youth reported higher rates of sexual victimization, substance abuse, and depression than their heterosexual peers (Cochran et al., 2002). LGB youth were almost twice as likely to leave home than their heterosexual and cisgender peers (12.38 times vs. 6.69 times) and 14.3% of LGB youth reported leaving home because of conflict with their parents due to their sexual orientation (Cochran et al., 2002).

A similar study conducted almost ten years later (2006) looked at data collected from 670 youth experiencing homelessness during a one-day public health survey in six American states (Leeuwan et al., 2006). Again, this study found that 22% of participants (n = 150) identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Seven youth identified as transgender, but due to the small sample size their information was not included in the secondary analysis of the data (Leeuwan et al., 2006). LGB youth were more likely to have been involved with child welfare (44% vs. 32%), attempt suicide (62% vs. 29%), engage in survival sex work (19% vs. 8%) and binge drink (42% vs. 27%) than their heterosexual peers (Leeuwan et al., 2006).

A more recent study conducted in 2013 looked at the data collected from telephone interviews with youth in foster care in Los Angeles (Wilson and Kastanis, 2015). Consistent with the number of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, Wilson and Kastanis (2015) found that 19% of youth in foster care identified as being LGBTQ. However, this time the number of youth identifying as transgender significantly increased – they found that 5.6% of youth in foster care identified as trans (Wilson & Kastanis, 2015). They also found that LGBTQ youth were more than twice as likely to report being treated poorly by the foster care system (12.93% vs. 5.78%), three times more likely to have been hospitalized for emotional reasons (13.47% vs. 4.25%) and almost twice as likely to have experienced homelessness (21% vs. 13.9%) than their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Wilson & Kastanis, 2015).

The cumulative finding from these studies not only tell us that LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented among youth experiencing homelessness, but also that they are more likely to be involved with child welfare, attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, and experience physical and sexual violence. We can also clearly see that the proportion of LGBTQ+ youth among youth experiencing homelessness has not changed drastically since the mid-1990s. This fact alone

should certainly be an indicator that LGBTQ+ youth are not receiving the supports they need to stay housed. According to qualitative research conducted by Dr. Abramovich (2017) with youth and shelter staff, shelter systems are fundamentally not set up to accommodate the needs of LGBTQ+ youth. This includes failure to intervene in homophobic and transphobic bullying and violence, lack of knowledge and training for shelter staff, and gender segregated spaces (Abramovich, 2017). For these reasons, LGBTQ+ youth often face the double-edged sword of being unsafe both at home and in the shelter system. Thus, purpose of our research was to hear from LGBTQ+ youth themselves about their needs, experiences, and what they want to see changed.

Methodology

This research was conducted by a small team of LGBTQ+ community members. The project was funded and supported by the Youth Project – the primary organization supporting LGBTQ+ youth in Nova Scotia. Considering the long history of queer and trans people being researched, medicalized, and pathologized by predominantly cisgender and heterosexual academics and healthcare professionals, we felt that it was important to ground this work within LGBTQ+ communities. The ultimate goal of this work is to inform the development of services and programs for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness.

For our research we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with nine youth between January and April 2017. All of the participants were recruited through Phoenix Youth Programs as it is the only youth-specific shelter operating within the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). We recruited participants through convenience sampling by attending the drop-in center, employment center, and emergency shelter. Participants were also asked to refer their friends to participate. Participants were eligible to participate if they were under the age of

25, identified as being LGBTQ, and had experienced homelessness. Participants were given a \$25 Loblaws gift card at the end of the interview as compensation for participation.

Before the interview, we explained the focus of the study and told participants that they could choose not to answer a question, or stop the interview at any time. The interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes. The participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about their experiences with homelessness, being out, homophobia and transphobia, and what they would like to see changed. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for thematic content. The participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities and these pseudonyms will also be used in this report to ensure confidentiality.

All of the respondents identified within the LGBTQ+ community and ranged in age from 19 to 25 years old. Participants were asked to identify their gender identity. Four respondents identified as cisgender women, two identified as cisgender men, two identified as non-binary (one female assigned at birth and the other male assigned at birth), and one identified as a trans man. None of the respondents identified as being a trans woman. Participants were also asked to identify their sexual orientation. Three participants identified as bisexual, two identified as queer, and the four other participants identified as gay, lesbian, homoflexible, and bi-curious.

The link between LGBTQ+ youth and homelessness

There are many reasons why LGBTQ+ youth might find themselves homeless including family conflict, poverty, and violence. According to Cochrane et al. (2002), family conflict is the reason that most homeless youth report having left home. For many LGBTQ+ youth, family rejection is still a reality. This is especially true for transgender youth. One participant, Mark, shared a particularly heartbreaking experience. Mark (21) who identified as homoflexible and

non-binary androgynous femme-male, said that he ended up homeless after he came out to his father:

I went into Phoenix because I came out to my father and he didn't accept me. He basically told me to leave because if I didn't leave he was going to grab the gun out of his shed and shoot me.

Unfortunately, for many LGBTQ+ experiencing homelessness, they face the double bind of being unsafe both at home and in the shelter system. Many of the youth that we interviewed reported that Phoenix Youth Shelter was the only shelter where they felt “safe”. However, one limitation of our study is that all of the youth that we interviewed were recruited through the Phoenix Youth Programs. This means that all of the youth included in this study had stayed at the Phoenix shelter for some length of time. Conversely, this study excluded youth who had never stayed at Phoenix and instead had couch-surfed, slept outside, stayed at other shelters, or found housing elsewhere. Similarly, this work also excluded youth who may have felt uncomfortable staying at Phoenix for whatever reason. Only three out of the nine youth had stayed at other shelters – Bryony, Adsum, and Barry House. Particular for youth who identify as LGBTQ+ they may feel unsafe in either a men's or a women's shelter. Notably, Mark said that he chose to sleep outside rather than go to another shelter:

To be honest, I felt like Phoenix was the only comfortable place to go. I felt like the other places, even though they were available, I felt as though I was a risk factor going there because I felt that by being put in a dangerous situation. I mean there was Metro Housing and Turning Point but those places have a lot of stigma, especially with people from the LGBT community. I've been called names by those people before so I felt very

uncomfortable going there. I feel like there needs to a space specifically for people specifically from the rainbow community.

Another participant named Jordan (19), who identified as a cisgender lesbian, said that once she engaged in sex work in exchange for housing:

I kind of threw my whole sexual orientation out the window just for a bed. It was cold that night, it was the night that big storm was happening. So, I completely threw out my sexual orientation. I gave him a blow job, he gave me a place to stay.

Unfortunately, Jordan's experience is not unique. According to Leeuwen et al. (2006), almost half of LGB youth experiencing homelessness (44%) have been asked by someone on the streets to exchange sex for money, food, drugs, shelter, clothing, and more. As well, the fact that LGBTQ+ youth need to sleep outside or engage in sex work to attain housing speaks volumes about the lack of safe and accessible emergency housing for LGBTQ+ youth.

Being out

Typically, in queer communities, "being out" refers to whether or not a person is open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Out of the nine participants, only two said that they were out about their sexual orientation. However, none of the trans or non-binary participants said that they were out about their gender identity while staying at the Phoenix shelter. One participant named Carrie (21), who self-identified as a queer cisgender woman, said that she hid her sexual orientation because otherwise she feared that male residents would try to "change" or "fix" her:

I know people who said that [they were lesbians] and then there was this big gang that tried to like change you. And to make you not like that... with the male residents and stuff. So, you just didn't say anything 'cause you didn't want to try to be fixed.

Notably, all three of the trans and non-binary youth said that either they were not out about their gender identity, or they were only out to a select group of trusted people. In fact, two participants stated explicitly that they hid their gender identity for safety reasons. When asked if they ever went back into the closet while staying at the shelter one participant, Jay (24), who identified as queer and non-binary said, "Oh definitely, 100%. I went back into the closet often for my safety".

Many of the youth that we interviewed said that they felt like they had to hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity because they witnessed the negative treatment that other LGBTQ+ youth experienced in the Phoenix shelter. Although seven of the nine participants said that they knew other residents who were out, only one participant said that knowing an out LGBTQ+ person positively impacted their experience. For that person, Alex (19), who identified as a bisexual cisgender woman, she described it as, "comforting to know that even though you're in the process, you're still able to be to be comfortable with yourself". Most of the other participants described it as "sad" or "heartbreaking" to watch the discrimination and bullying that other LGBTQ+ youth experienced. Tristian (19), who identified as a bi-curious cisgender man, said that, "for people who they felt were more visibility on the LGBTQ line... they tended to talk a lot more behind their backs and be a lot crueller about them." Similarly, Carrie said:

It kind of made you sad that there were more people like that there and if you talked and heard about how they ended up there it would normally connect back to their sexual orientation or gender identity. And, it was kind of hard, because you would watch some

people try to explore and figure their stuff out and then people weren't really supportive of them. People were really not the nicest, and wouldn't use the pronouns they wanted, and wouldn't call them by the name they wanted that day. So, it didn't encourage you to want be more open about yourself because you're watching other people's experiences.

Mark also described the heartbreaking story of a trans woman that he lived with at the shelter:

She really wanted to identify as she, and she really wanted to transition, and honestly this was one of the saddest things, but she ended up cutting her hair and going back to identifying as the gender she was assigned at birth, and it just wasn't.... It was just really sad. I don't understand why people have to do that. And this person even today is still like that afterwards even though they're out of Phoenix. And I feel like it's really sad. It felt heartbreaking, actually. It was really emotional. I kind of saw myself in that situation, a little bit, trying to empathize, and I felt like if I did the same thing with my gender orientation than I would be ostracized and outcast. I don't think it was really the Phoenix staffs' fault, per say, it was mostly the people staying there and the stigma around trans and queer youth

Because LGBTQ+ youth may not feel safe to be out about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity while staying in the shelter system, the staff working in the shelters may not be aware of their presence. This informational and institutional erasure limits the ability of LGBTQ+ to access necessary emergency housing and creates a cyclical effect the needs of LGBTQ+ youth continue to be invisible, overlooked, and ignored (Bauer et al., 2009).

Homophobia and transphobia

All nine of the participants said that they either directly experienced, or witnessed other residents experiencing, homophobia and transphobia while staying at the Phoenix shelter. Most

of the participants said that this took the form of verbal harassment, teasing, and bullying. Mark said that homophobic and transphobic bullying happened frequently:

All the time. People would even want me to come into the gossip and be like, “Oh this person is trans, that's disgusting”. And I'd just be like, “That's not right”. But I couldn't really defend myself. It's more stigma to me and that's not right.

Two participants said that the constant turnover in the shelter made it harder to predict whether or not it would be safe for them to be out as LGBTQ+. Alex specifically mentioned that she thought the Phoenix shelter more unsafe than the Phoenix House – a 10 bed supportive housing program – precisely because of the daily turnover:

I find it was more so the shelter than the house because the shelter is more people coming in, more people leaving. It's not as steady as the house. So, with the shelter they like to judge before they ask. One of my friends got bullied back in the shelter because she was a male trying to transition to a female. So that transition was really hard for her. It's crazy, actually, the amount of hatred towards people just cause they're different.

Similarly, Jordan said the frequently turn-over of the shelter her feel more unsafe:

That's the thing with the shelters, you don't know who is going to walk in that door next. That is the big thing when it comes to homophobia in the shelter. That is a huge thing when it comes to being homeless. There is never one of the same group, and if there is the same group, then, lucky straw, you better hope they're the good group.

Certainly, the unpredictability of homelessness – not knowing where you are going to sleep tonight, where your next meal is coming from, or who will be at the shelter tomorrow – is extremely stressful for anybody. According to the participants that we interviewed, along with

the stress of being homeless, they also had to deal with the additional stress of wondering whether the people that they meet will be homophobic and transphobic.

Eight out of the nine participants said that other residents either seemed to agree with the homophobic and transphobic bullying or just passively ignored it. When asked if other residents intervened or challenged homophobic and transphobia, Jay said:

Oh no, hell no. Cause then you're a target. "Well, why do you care? Do you want that person?" Now you're the target. Do you want to make yourself a target to defend someone else? No, you don't. Most people don't.

A notable exception to this was Alisha (19), who identified as a bisexual cisgender woman. She said that she would stand up to and physically threaten people who were being homophobic and transphobic:

Sometimes guys will be assholes to other men who are gay. They'll call them like faggots and stuff. Most people just try to mind their own biz but I would say something. You know, I stick up for pretty much normally anyone. I always stick up for people. I don't like watching people getting bullied. Usually I'll just like threaten to beat them up. I only like beating up bullies. I don't like beating up innocent people.

However, not all queer and trans youth are able to physically defend themselves from homophobic and transphobic violence, nor should they have to. We need to make sure that there are systems in place to not only prevent homophobic and transphobic bullying and violence before it happens, but also to support and nurture LGBTQ+ youth.

Staff responses homophobia and transphobia

All the participants said if staff members witnessed homophobia and transphobia occurring then they would intervene and try to stop it from happening. However, the majority of the participants, seven out of nine, said that homophobia and transphobia usually occurred off the shelter grounds and out of earshot from the staff. Alex said:

I never saw it happen in the shelter directly. It would always be when we're out, during out times or stuff like that. So, it wasn't in staffs' eyes. That's the whole trouble with the shelter. Either you get very lucky and they do something in front of staff, or they wait till you are off properties, that way they know they're not getting discharged.

As well, two participants said that they did not feel comfortable talking with staff about their experiences of homophobia and transphobia. Jay said:

See, there was this whole thing about talking to staff where you had to be careful because if you talked to staff too much you would get the rat title. Or you would get the staff pet title. So, you could talk to staff, but you had to be kind of, like, careful about it.

Only few of the participants, four out of nine, said that knew any staff members who were out while working at the Phoenix Shelter, However, another three of the participants said they "suspected" that certain staff members were LGBTQ+ but that those staff members were not explicitly out. Nonetheless, out of the seven participants who said they either knew or suspected that there were LGBTQ+ staff members, six said that knowing those staff members had a positive impact on their experiences staying at the shelter. Carrie said:

Especially if you were having problems you felt more comfortable going to them because... it's not the other staff weren't supportive... but it's just that like, I don't know, they kind of understood it better. Or they'd been through things like that. Or they knew services and supports.

Similarly, Tristan said:

I mean, they're typically some of the best people to go to for support because they're the ones that tend to somehow understand us a bit more. I guess it's because they've been through some of the same problems we have... like someone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, they know those experiences.

Mark, who did not know or suspect that there were any LGBTQ+ staff members, said that he thought that having LGBTQ+ staff members working at the Phoenix shelter would positively benefit LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness:

I feel like some people, you look at the demographic of people too, they're younger people. They still identify with role models. So, I feel like having a queer staff would actually work really well because they would feel more comfortable talking to them than someone who hasn't been through that path or that journey or experience.

The fact that the vast majority of participants said either that they wished they had known LGBTQ+ staff members, or that knowing LGBTQ+ members positively impacted their experience, indicates that having LGBTQ+ staff working with LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness can be a positive factor in their lives. For vulnerable youth who are going through an extremely difficult time in their lives, having someone around who can understand at least part of their experiences is invaluable. The role of positive role models in promoting resiliency cannot be understated.

The unique needs of LGBTQ+ youth

All of the participants said that they felt that LGBTQ+ youth who experience homelessness have needs that are different than those of cisgender and heterosexual youth who

experience homelessness. Three of the participants identified mental health supports as being particularly important. Tristian said:

In general, I feel it would be awesome if there was a lot easier access to mental support.

Cause that can be a problem for anyone. And when you're constantly being thrown under the bus or given all this hate and negative feedback, it makes it even more important.

Seven of the nine youth said that they thought that trans youth in particular needed extra supports. The identified needs included having access to information about gender transition, access to gender affirming garments (binders, packers, and gaffs), information about sexual health, having pronouns respected, and simply having a safe place to stay. Carrie said:

Especially trans [youth], I found that they needed additional supports. For them it is just like trying to figure out how to exist. Some of them wanted to do hormone stuff but they couldn't really do it in the shelters. They didn't have the supports and didn't have the funds or resources to do it. I knew people who would bind themselves in really not great ways because they also didn't have the resources to access safe ways to do it. And with sexual orientation, it's more just being able to feel safe in those spaces. It's not always there and it doesn't make you comfortable to express yourself. It makes you just want to bottle it up.

Similarly, Jordan expressed that trans and non-binary youth are more vulnerable to physical violence than LGB youth:

I feel like trans [youth] get the more beats out of it. I can't even imagine how hard it must be for a transgender guy to come into a shelter and experience all those different people.

Like I said, I've seen some guys treat them like assholes and it's not fair, not fair at all.

Tristan expressed fear for a trans friend who had no safe place to use the bathroom or spend the night:

My friend had conflict while staying in the shelter, they just didn't vocalize it because I knew a lot of people had issues with the fact they were going from female to male. They had trouble understanding where to go for stuff like the bathroom. If you don't know where to go with anything in life it makes it a lot more stressful. Like, for other shelters that aren't mixed gender it comes back to, where do you go? Cause if you're going to be discriminated against if you go to either one, how can you figure out where you're supposed to go? And anytime they got discharged, I was like, where are they gonna go? I hope you're going to be safe. But where?

Finally, Jay said that they were not asked about their pronouns during their initial intake at the Phoenix shelter:

They did not ask pronouns when I went to be checked in. And if they had asked me pronouns, it would have made a big difference in my stay at Phoenix. They ask what you identify as now. I did not get asked my pronouns. I did not get asked my identity. It was assumed that I was a cis woman. I did eventually, yes, out myself to the staff. But, I feel like it would have been a little easier if during the original intake, they had been like, what do you identify as? Because then I would have been like, "Oh well, I'm non-binary, I use they/them pronouns". But since I wasn't asked I assumed it wasn't an option. Do you know what I mean? And plus, since they had male/female beds, I was like, oh, well, I guess I'll go with female...

Having a safe space for transgender youth to stay was identified as a need by several participants. While the Phoenix shelter is one of the few mixed-gender shelters in the HRM, it is

still divided into male and female floors. Phoenix does have a gender-neutral room or “Swing Room” next to the staff office on the middle floor where trans and non-binary youth can stay.

However, according to Jay, this can still pose problems:

There’s a room right next to the staff office. The people called this the Rat Box at the shelter. The staff call it the Swing Room. Youth that are going to be targeted go into that room because it’s right next to the staff office. But it actually caused me some more problems. Because people were like, “Why are you in that room? Are you a rat? You don’t do a bunch of drugs like the other people”. And I was like, “Ah, I’m just trying to get sober”. So, you’re targeted in a different way for being in that room.

Another problem faced particularly by transgender youth is that Phoenix is one of the only mixed-gender shelters and there are few other shelters that explicitly accept trans and non-binary residents. The Phoenix shelter has a policy where residents “time out” after six weeks. When residents time out, they have to leave the Phoenix shelter for two weeks before they are allowed to return. This policy poses problems for trans and non-binary youth who are often left without another place stay. For Jay, Phoenix was the only shelter available to them:

There are not really options for us, shelter-wise. The time out thing at Phoenix, I understand why they do it, to try to give access to as many people as possible. And this is really hard to do because you can’t play favorites either, but there’s some individual exceptions where that’s different. The expectation when you’re timed out is that you’re going to go to another shelter. That you’re going to go to a women’s shelter or a men’s shelter. But someone like me, if I’m timed out at Phoenix, what am I supposed to do?

Moving forwards

When asked what could be done to better support LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness, the participants identified four potential ideas: education around gender identity and sexual orientation, starting a peer support group, having out LGBTQ+ staff, and creating housing specifically for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness.

Education

Three participants spoke specifically about the importance of education in order to combat homophobia and transphobia. In particular, Carrie talked about the importance of educating people about the intersection between race and sexual orientation. She talked about the importance of educating people about two spirit identities:

People made these assumptions about you because of your sexual orientation, and then wanted to fix you because apparently that's what people do when you aren't what they want, what they think you should be. Also, people were like, "Oh, you're Native, you must be that two-spirit type of person". And I was trying to explain to people that, "No, I'm not that and those are completely different things". I had to educate people on what two spirit means. So yeah, education is probably a big one.

Similarly, Jordan talked about the importance of educating people about sexual orientation, gender identity, and pronouns:

I think when people come into the shelter it should be explained what the sexual orientations are. Not all of them, but they should get some down right because there are some kids that come in there and they don't know, and they freak out. There needs to be actual education. As soon as you get into the Phoenix shelter they should explain that these are some of the people that you're gonna have to be dealing with and these are what they're about. Not outing them, but [explaining that] these are the types of people who

might come here. Explaining pronouns. Like, you said pronouns to me, and I was like, “What the f**k, I don’t even know what a noun is!” There should be like some education of what this stuff is, like gender identity, what it really is.

For Tristian, education was a key component of ending discrimination and making the world a better place for LGBTQ+ youth. He said:

You can put so many rules and regulations in place, but unless people can stop having all these discriminative ideas, it’s not exactly going to change. I mean, if people can learn to accept it a bit more or just look at it and go like, “Hey, you’re still human”, even something simple like that would make a world of difference.

Peer Support Groups

Two participants talked about the important of developing programs and peer support groups for LGBTQ+ trans youth experiencing homelessness. Jay said that having a peer-support group at the shelter would have helped them figure who to talk to about their gender identity and sexual orientation:

I feel like it probably would have been good if they'd had some kind of a group. Although then there'd be issues with outage, too. But maybe if they had a group for queer, trans people to talk at the shelter that could be cool. So they could get together. I think something like that would have been really helpful. Because if I could have at least figured out... I couldn't even figure out who the other people I was able to talk to were, completely. I just think that if they had a group, even like once a week, a queer/trans group or something at the shelter that would have been really helpful.

Alex echoed a similar sentiment when she said:

I guess programming in the community for trans and coming out. Cause I know the Youth Project does things and stuff like that, but I don't know, now that I'm not quite involved in GSA no more, I don't really hear about it as often. So more things to go into the community, to bring awareness not only, but to make people feel more accepted. Whether they are rainbows or they're not. It shouldn't matter. But definitely get the information out.

Having out LGBTQ+ staff

Three participants talked about the importance of out LGBTQ+ staff working in the Phoenix shelter so that LGBTQ+ could have someone they could talk to, connect, and reduce social isolation. Alex said:

I feel like if they had someone from the Youth Project working with Phoenix in the shelter that would make people feel more comfortable. Especially if they are youth coming in the shelter and they're like, "I know you! You're from the Youth Project!" I feel like that connection there would be helpful for them on that base. Because then they know they're not alone, whether they be with Phoenix staff or that Youth Project person. They have that connection, they have that tether basically, to the safety. They're not like, "I'm here by myself, I don't know anybody, what am I gonna do?"

Similarly, Ray talked about the importance of having someone to talk who understands the unique experiences of trans and non-binary youth:

I kind of wish I'd had somebody to talk to at the shelter who knew what dysphoria was as a concept. Cause I tried to talk to a friend a little bit about it but it was sort of trigger-y to him so I didn't really want to bring it up all the time. I don't think any of the other staff really knew all that much about dysphoria. Which, I mean, if you're cis, you don't.

There's no explaining that to somebody who hasn't experienced it, really. I just wish there'd been somebody I could've talked to about that a little bit more because I felt really isolated that way. Especially, being non-binary, I feel like I get double dysphoria almost. Like, I'm not male or female. So, I feel like I get dysphoria from both.

Housing specifically for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness.

Throughout the interviews, the participants consistently identified the need for places where LGBTQ+ youth could go to feel safe. Six out of the nine participants talked about the need for a physical location, whether that was a queer floor in an existing shelter, a separate shelter specifically for LGBTQ+ youth, or some form of supportive housing program. Mark said:

Honestly, I feel as though they need their own space. When you go into a shelter, like the Phoenix shelter, it's automatically assumed its co-ed, but there's also people being faced with a bunch of labels in front of them. When they go in its like, well, do I go on the men's or the women's floor? Is there a queer space? Is there a space that I can feel comfortable with? Is there a space where I won't get judged? I think a shelter, in my opinion, is actually more suitable [than a queer floor], because even if there was a queer space in a shelter I still feel as though people would be targeted because people would know that they're there. Whereas a queer shelter can be in an anonymous, unknown, location that only queer people know. I found even with the supervised apartments themselves there was a male house, a female house, and a co-ed house. And again, that's reinforcing a gender binary that some people don't see.

Jay also echoed the importance of a having a space for queer and trans people. However, they felt pessimistic that such a space would ever exist:

In my opinion there needs to be a queer/trans space of some sort for homeless people. I mean, there's so many of us, we need a space of some sort. Either we get a space, or we take a space. I'd like to think that a queer/trans shelter would be awesome but I really don't see that happening to be blunt. Unfortunately, I don't think the government cares enough to do that. Honestly, I really don't. But I'm very pessimistic. But, I think that if we took what we already had and made it more open that might be more of the solution. I guess that some of the women's shelters are making big efforts to try to include trans women now. But I'm not trans fem so I don't really know how well that is going.

Finally, Tristan talked about the importance of a safe and accepting space. For them, being homeless is hard enough which also having to worry about homophobia and transphobia:

I feel like if there was some sort of shelter-esque system at least that could be a support because while I know there's some families that are accepting, there's some that really aren't. And when you're thrown onto the street, it's hard enough as a straight person, or someone who might seem to be straight. And the more that you have on your plate it just makes it a lot harder to be able to know how to get to somewhere, what places you can feel comfortable in. We need different supports that would lend a hand to being able to build yourself up from probably one of the roughest times.

Conclusion

It's clear that we need to do more to support LGBTQ+ experiencing homelessness. LGBTQ+ youth are not only over-represented among youth experiencing homeless, but they are at a higher risk of attempting suicide, engaging in survival sex work, and experiencing homophobic and transphobic violence compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts (Abramovich, 2012; Abramovich, 2017; Cochran et al., 2002; Kidd, Gaetz, & O'Grady, 2017;

Leeuwen, et al., 2006). Thus, LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness find themselves in the double bind of being unsafe both at home and in the shelter system. While more shelters are adopting trans-inclusion policies, this work is not going far enough. Our current shelter system continues to exclude and marginalize LGBTQ+ youth through homophobic and transphobic violence, gender-segregated spaces, and lack of supports and programming specifically for LGBTQ+ youth. It is time to address the needs of this often overlooked and forgotten population. It is LGBTQ+ youth themselves who are the experts on their own experiences and it is time that we listened to their testimonies. We hope that this study will be a call to action for both our government and our communities.

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About the Authors

Gabriel Enxuga is a BSW student studying at Dalhousie University. At this time of this project, he was working as a community educator with the Youth Project, facilitating workshops about gender identity and sexual orientation. Gabriel has an interest in exploring the structures that contribute to social inequity and poverty, with a focus on the experiences of trans people with our shelter systems and healthcare systems.

Jace Miller is a community member and advocate within the trans community. He has years of experience with facilitation and education about the experiences of trans youth experiencing homelessness.

Rhys Alden is a registered social worker with addiction services in Glasgow, Scotland.