3 PATHWAYS INTO AND OUT OF HOMELESSNESS FOR LGBTQ2S YOUTH

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Introduction

Over a decade ago, youth homelessness advocates noticed a spike in the number of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness. Multiple causes for the disproportionate rate at which LGBTQ2S youth experience homelessness have been reported, including homophobia, transphobia, classism and racism, often resulting in increased involvement in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, individual and familial poverty and identity-based family rejection (Ray, 2006). This chapter focuses on how the single narrative of family rejection has influenced the movement to address LGBTQ2S youth homelessness. We will also discuss the importance of an intersectional approach to this issue, and then, using that intersectional lens, we will consider alternative pathways into and out of homelessness for LGBTQ2S young people.

History of Family Rejection

Historically, the fundamental narrative highlighted by community advocates, service providers and national organizations to describe the cause of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness has been that of identity-based family rejection. This narrative includes stories of young people who come out to their families or are forcibly outed to their families by others as LGBTQ2S and are subsequently kicked out of their homes, resulting in sudden homelessness. The narrative of family rejection is an accurate description of the path to homelessness for some LGBTQ2S youth, but not for all. For example, in an ethnographic study of Latino LGBT youth in New York City, Castellanos (2016) found that homelessness was not solely the result of conflict over sexual orientation for most participants in his study: 8 of 13 participants left home before disclosing their identity, and 10 of 13 returned home after disclosing their identity and maintaining family connections. The most common pathway to homelessness in Castellanos' study was preexisting family conflict that was heightened by a young person's sexual orientation, gender identity or expression (Castellanos, 2016). While participants may have been met with negative reactions about their identities, those negative reactions were rarely the sole precipitator of homelessness.

LGBTQ2S homelessness has been called an invisible issue, with little to no public awareness. This lack of awareness often results in limited resources and funding (Berg, 2016), but the family-rejection narrative increases the likelihood of raising awareness and generating funding for this severely underfunded problem (Price, Wheeler, Shelton, & Maury, 2016). It is also more palatable for the general public to see the cause of a young person's housing insecurity as a single person or family, giving the sense that there is definite cause and effect with an apparent solution. In truth, there is no easy and clear solution to larger societal problems such as the racism, classism and poverty that so often perpetuate experiences of chronic homelessness and housing instability (Simões, 2015).

The emphasis on the family-rejection narrative has resulted in serious consequences for LGBTQ2S youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, as well as for the advocates who represent them. By focusing on this one narrative, we have reduced the wide-ranging intersectional issue of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness to a single-cause issue, excluding other narratives and experiences by default. Focusing on individual family characteristics distracts from the structural issues and socioeconomic factors that produce and maintain homelessness and housing instability (Castellanos, 2016). Furthermore, because over 65% of young people experiencing homelessness are youth of colour (Bridges, 2007), continuously highlighting the family-rejection narrative has the potential to send an unintended message that families of colour are more homophobic and more likely to reject their children (Simões, 2015). It is harmful to uphold family rejection as the only narrative, because it distracts from recognizing poverty and racism as root causes of homelessness, and narrowly focuses strategies to prevent and intervene in LGBTQ2S youth homelessness on families.

Changing the Narrative

Research shows that LGBTQ2S young people experience homelessness for multiple reasons (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015; Ray, 2006). The issue can be resolved only if advocates, educators, researchers, service providers, elected officials and young people with lived experience of homelessness are focusing their attention on innovative solutions to all the possible pathways into homelessness. By centering the intersecting experiences of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness, advocates and service providers can begin to extend the conversation beyond the family-rejection narrative and highlight the structural inequities and systemic barriers faced by young people who experience or

are at risk of experiencing homelessness. The following sections explore some of these intersections and emphasize how they affect pathways into and out of homelessness for LGBTQ2S young people.

Economic Empowerment and Stability

In a survey of youth homelessness service providers, respondents ranked employment as one of the top needs of the LGBTQ2S young people they serve (Choi et al., 2015). LGBTQ2S youth and young adults are too often unemployed and underemployed, making it difficult for them to attain self-sufficiency. There are several reasons for this, most stemming from the effects of stigma and discrimination. Employment discrimination takes many forms, including failure to hire or promote fairly, reduction of work hours, harassment or bullying, and non-enforcement of existing anti-discrimination policies. When considered in the context of the myriad other disparities confronting them, it may not be surprising that LGBTQ2S young people also face discrimination in the workplace. However, economic discrimination, including limited access to stable and safe employment, comes with long-lasting consequences, which perpetuate cycles of poverty and prolong the threat of homelessness for many LGBTQ2S young people (Mallory & Sears, 2015).

The social and economic ramifications of unstable or insufficient employment are further complicated when young people who are attempting to enter the work force hold multiple marginalized racial, ethnic, sexual and gender identities; their experiences of discrimination are compounded at those intersections. For example, an American study found that 26% of African American and 15% of Hispanic or Latino/Latina employees reported having been unfairly treated at their jobs within the previous month, and more than 40% of LGB employees and 90% of transgender people in the work force experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity in the workplace (Mallory & Sears, 2015). Researchers at the Williams Institute found that, compared to just 9% of White employees, 27% of African American and 20% of Hispanic employees reported having been passed over for a job for which they believed they were qualified (Mallory & Sears, 2015). The same survey also found that LGBTQ2S employees filed complaints of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity at similar rates as workers who are people of colour filed complaints of racially motivated discrimination, and cisgender female workers filed complaints of sex-based discrimination. The burden of navigating workplace discrimination as a person of colour who is also LGBTQ2S is

further exacerbated by issues of age and class when an employee is also young and has a history of family poverty, which can affect their level of preparedness for the work force and raise the stakes when they do not succeed.

While there are outlined federal protections in the United States (U.S.) against both racial discrimination and ageism that target older employees in the workplace, the same cannot be said for similar protections covering sexual orientation, gender identity and ageism targeting youth. This lack of protection contributes to the unprotected economic status of LGBTQ2S young people, who can be fired or not hired simply for who they are and who they love. In the U.S., 28 states have no statewide employment nondiscrimination protections covering sexual orientation and gender identity. In fact, three of these states have passed laws prohibiting both the enforcement of any existing local nondiscrimination laws and the passage of any new such ordinances. This means more than half the states in the country do not offer protection to their residents against workplace discrimination based on gender expression, gender identity, or sexuality (Movement Advancement Project, 2016).

Some of the difficulties faced by LGBTQ2S youth attempting to enter the workforce and attain economic stability are mirrored by and attributable to hostile school environments. According to the *2015 National School Climate Survey*, over 70% of LGBTQ2S students in the U.S. report having been verbally harassed, 27% physically harassed, and 13% physically assaulted at school because of their sexual orientation. Similarly, 55% were verbally harassed, 20% physically harassed, and 9% physically assaulted due to their gender expression. LGBTQ2S students who experienced this kind of victimization were three times more likely (44% vs. 12%) to have missed school in the previous month and have lower grade point averages (3.1 vs. 3.4) than their heterosexual and cisgender peers. LGBTQ2S students are also more likely to drop out of high school, with 43% citing harassment at school as the reason (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016). When LGBTQ2S students must navigate these types of negative experiences in educational environments—environments in which they would otherwise be preparing for success in the workforce and gaining life skills—the risk of sustaining cycles of poverty and homelessness is increased.

Child Welfare Involvement

The consequences of chronic poverty and homelessness vary greatly, but one common outcome is involvement in the foster care system. Despite being designed to house and protect children and young people, the foster care system often effectively works as a pipeline into homelessness for LGBTQ2S youth (Berg, 2016). Similar to narratives about the catalysts for housing instability, some youth find themselves thrust into the child welfare system due to familial rejection of their actual or perceived gender and sexuality. While this experience accounts for a percentage of LGBTQ2S youth in the foster care system, there are multiple factors that can lead to foster care involvement beyond family rejection, such as poverty, neglect, physical abuse, criminal justice involvement and more. Once in the system, which is typically not set up to meet their unique needs (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006), LGBTQ2S young people face housing instability upon leaving the system or ageing out of care.

The failures of the foster care system are the result of oppressive societal forces such as racism, classism and heterosexism that are inherently woven into the fabric of the system. These systems of oppression have led to a disproportionate representation of youth of colour, families living below the poverty line and LGBTQ2S young people in the system. Youth and families of colour live under close surveillance. One study, completed by the Yale University Child Study Center (2016) indicated that in pre-schools, Black and African-American boys are observed and monitored much more closely than their White counterparts (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016). This kind of over-surveillance through implicit bias affects the foster care system as well, and can lead to increased accusations of poor parenting and the forcible removal of a young person from the care of their parent or guardian. It is therefore no coincidence that in 2014, youth of colour made up 66% of those in the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016), an overrepresentation when compared to their numbers in the general population, which is about 30% (Child Trends Databank, 2014).

Families living in poverty are met with similar scrutiny because of a lack of necessary resources available to meet their needs. This lack of support can sometimes lead to an inability to pay rent, resulting in eviction and a loss of housing, or survival crimes being committed by a young person's parent, leading to the parent's incarceration. Without a network of adults available to care for such young people, they may find themselves placed in foster care (Hook, Romich, Lee, Marcenko, & Kang, 2016).

Once they are in the foster care system, many LGBTQ2S young people are housed in environments that are not affirming of their gender identity or sexuality, leading to placement disruptions or running away from that home for their own safety (Berg, 2016). Statistically, the longer a young person is placed in foster care, the fewer chances they have of being adopted or entering a stable housing environment: "After spending 12 to 18 continuous months in foster care, children's chances of leaving foster care rapidly decreased. After 36 to 42 months of continuous time spent in foster care, a child's chances of leaving foster care are incredibly low" (Ringeisen, Tueller, Testa, Dolan, & Smith, 2013).

Juvenile Legal Involvement

When systems are not set up to meet the needs of LGBTQ2S young people, they look elsewhere for support and stability. For many young people, this can mean staying on the street with friends, or trading sex for housing. These behaviours, particularly sleeping in public parks and engaging in survival sex, are criminalized and lead to involvement in the juvenile legal system. Transgender and gender-expansive young women of colour are among the most targeted for these behaviours, and face increased rates of targeting and incarceration by law enforcement. In fact, transgender people are "3.7 times more likely to experience police violence compared to cisgender survivors and victims of police violence" (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2016) and are "seven times more likely to experience physical violence when interacting with the police compared to cisgender survivors and victims" (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2016).

Another player in the criminalization of LGBTQ2S young people are school systems. For many LGBTQ2S youth, schools are environments in which they face harassment, bullying and even violence. In addition, LGBTQ2S youth are often blamed for their victimization, face increased surveillance by school officials and are punished more harshly by school staff (Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015). LGBTQ2S youth are sometimes even pressured by school officials to drop out of school, as an attempt by schools to avoid responsibility for protecting young people from a transphobic and homophobic environment (Burdge Lacoma, & Hyemingway, 2014).

United States Federal Response

In 2015, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) released a report, *Preventing and Ending Youth Homelessness: A Coordinated Community Response*, highlighting the four core outcomes on which communities should focus to prevent and end youth homelessness: permanent connections; stable housing; education and employment; and social and emotional well-being. The following sections outline innovative solutions to LGBTQ2S youth homelessness using the USICH's four core outcomes (USICH, 2015).

Permanent Connections

Establishing permanent connections is one way LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness can begin to enter stable housing environments. These connections can be formed through a variety of relationships: previous caseworkers, family, friends, teachers and foster parents—essentially anyone who has provided safety and stability at one time or another. These permanent connections can lead to financial support, access to resources and emotional support, all critical pieces to ending homelessness and housing instability.

LGBTQ2S youth who may not have these types of formal connections to rely upon for support may turn to their peers, forming chosen family systems that mimic traditional families in their roles and responsibilities. Chosen families showcase one of the many ways LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness are resilient and resourceful. Supporting one another in ways that can encompass housing and financial assistance are just some examples of the benefits of chosen families; more than anything, for many LGBTQ2S young people, "the families that they construct are the first time they have experienced healthy and affirming family dynamics" (Price et al., 2016).

Education and Employment

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, economic empowerment is another pathway for LGBTQ2S young people to break free from cycles of poverty and chronic homelessness. While educators and employers have a role to play, so too do case managers and care coordinators at homelessness service agencies. These staff people are the front-line touch points for LGBTQ2S young people who are experiencing housing instability. They can

take active steps to ensure LGBTQ2S young people will be safe and affirmed when they make referrals or partner on their behalf with schools, employment training programs and employers. An effective and practical first step for case managers and care coordinators includes investigating a referral organization's history of working with LGBTQ2S young people before making a direct referral or establishing a partnership. When necessary, they can recommend, arrange or facilitate competency training for the organization's staff and volunteers, focusing on the specific needs of LGBTQ2S young people and guiding the organizations toward instituting LGBTQ2S-affirming best practices and policies.

Over 80% of LGBTQ2S students report being aware of LGBTQ-related discriminatory practices and policies in their schools (Kosciw et al., 2016). Nearly three-quarters of LGBTQ2S students are aware of these discriminatory practices and policies affecting other students; two-thirds have experienced this discrimination first-hand (Kosciw et al., 2016). School environments in which LGBTQ2S students are unprotected and unsafe can lead to negative educational outcomes for them. On the other hand, when students feel more assured of their safety at school, educational outcomes improve, along with significant and ongoing positive repercussions, including increased economic empowerment. There are a number of ways to ensure greater safety in the learning environment for LGBTQ2S young people. These include expanding access to and participation in Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs); improving the quantity and quality of positive representations of LGBTQ2S people, history and issues in educational curricula; and increasing the availability and visibility of LGBTQ2S-supportive teachers and administrators (Kosciw et al., 2016).

When addressing employment discrimination and its impact on LGBTQ2S young people, the degree of legal recourse available to LGBTQ2S employees varies by state. However, despite a lack of legal protection, employers and employees can take steps to ensure they are creating a workplace that is free of harassment, safe and affirming for all employees, regardless of their age, sexual identity or gender identity and expression. An important step is identifying allies of LGBTQ2S people in the workplace. Non-LGBTQ2S colleagues have less at stake than their LGBTQ2S counterparts—particularly when considering employees with multiple marginalized identities, who are relatively new to the workforce—and are therefore exposed to less risk in the workplace when they speak up for equality and justice for LGBTQ2S employees. Adding explicit protections for LGBTQ2S employees to human resources policies and, when necessary, enforcing those policies, also sends a strong message of being a workplace that intends to uphold equality and safety for all employees. Mandating training for all new employees that includes LGBTQ2S awareness and sensitivity is another step to prevent discrimination in the workplace.

When LGBTQ2S young people strive for economic empowerment using the same means as their cisgender and heterosexual peers—most typically education and employment— their access to the same degree of empowerment is not guaranteed unless they can be assured of fair treatment in these environments. Because LGBTQ2S people experience poverty at higher rates, assuring access for LGBTQ2S young people to stable employment and safe, affirming educational environments is essential to ending the cycles of economic instability and homelessness.

Social and Emotional Well-Being

Social support and well-being is a critical component of preventing and ending homelessness for LGBTQ2S young people. Families can support the social and emotional well-being of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness, but they may need guidance to do so. Families in this context can mean biological, legal or chosen families. For LGBTQ2S youth who have strained relationships with their biological families, chosen families may be able to provide emotional well-being by constructing safe and affirming family structures. While these family structures are referred to as 'chosen,' they should be respected and considered to be as legitimate as biological families: "It is essential that service providers and advocates respect the families as defined by the youth they are working with, in the same way that they would respect a youth's chosen name or pronouns" (Lowrey, 2016).

For LGBTQ2S youth who have maintained contact with their biological or legal families, or who wish to reconnect with them, family reunification or reconnection may be an option. Reunification is not the goal for every young person; however, for families who have the desire and capacity to be mended, it should be facilitated. Family reunification takes time and can be key in preventing future occurrences of housing instability and homelessness (Pergamit, Gelatt, Stratford, Beckwith, & Carver Martin, 2016). While reunification can happen informally within the family, the Urban Institute notes, "...reconnection with family can be more successful if the youth goes through the process while supported by service providers" (Pergamit et al., 2016).

Another factor in establishing permanent housing outcomes through social and emotional well-being is to ensure that LGBTQ2S young people have access to inclusive, affirming and holistic health care. A large proportion of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness have histories of trauma, stemming from their involvement with the juvenile justice or

foster care systems, family rejection, bullying or street involvement (Berg, 2016). To begin the healing process, LGBTQ2S youth require medical providers that are inclusive and non-pathologizing, who create an affirming space for young people to be open and honest about their feelings and experiences (Berg, 2016).

Stable Housing

With the introduction of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) in 1974 came much-needed services for unaccompanied young people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. Over 40 years later, these services haven't changed much, though we have learned a considerable amount about the experiences and needs of young people experiencing homelessness. RHYA funds three different programs that make up the continuum for runaway and homeless youth services: 1) Basic center programs, which also include emergency shelters; 2) Transitional living programs; and 3) Street outreach programs (National Network for Youth, 2013). By comparison, the federal government in Canada introduced a homelessness strategy in 1999. The Homelessness Partnering Strategy provides program funding to communities to address issues related to youth homelessness; however, there is no direct youth homelessness funding stream or targeted strategy in Canada (Gaetz & Redman, 2016).

In both the U.S. and Canada, policies addressing youth homelessness need to be reconsidered to ensure that all subpopulations of young people experiencing homelessness are included (e.g., LGBTQ2S, racialized, and pregnant and parenting young people), and to move from the existing reactive temporary solutions to a more proactive sustainable model that also includes prevention, with a focus on permanent housing. Moving away from time-limited emergency housing to a long-term more sustainable housing model is essential if we are to reduce the number of young people experiencing homelessness (Gaetz, 2014).

The disparities confronting LGBTQ2S young people are rooted in discrimination, homophobia and transphobia. The effects of these systemic oppressions can lead to poverty and homelessness for LGBTQ2S youth in disproportionate numbers. In this chapter, we have outlined the negative consequences that a single family-rejection narrative can have when considering the issue of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness, including the exclusion of young people with different narratives who are often people of colour. We also discussed the ways the family-rejection narrative affects the solutions we consider, and thus the

policies we support, to address the issue of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness. In response to this narrative and its consequences for LGBTQ2S young people who experience homelessness or housing instability, we have offered three alternative ways to consider the causes, outcomes and solutions to addressing LGBTQ2S youth homelessness, by examining how economic empowerment, child welfare and juvenile justice involvement contribute to homelessness and housing instability. By investigating these issues using an intersectional lens, which takes into account multiple marginalized identities, it is clear that increasing access to pathways out of homelessness requires a holistic, systemic approach.

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