

# **9 POLICY INTO PRACTICE: HOW GOVERNMENT CAN PLAY A ROLE IN SUPPORTING LGBTQ2S YOUTH**

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## **Introduction**

As a society, we often express our desire that all young people will feel loved, included and have the opportunity to move into adulthood in a way that contributes to their wellness and success. We hope that no one would want any young person to become marginalized, drop out of school or, worse yet experience homelessness. Yet as we all know, these hopes are not always fulfilled. Many young people experience discrimination, exclusion and threats to their safety and well-being. Many, too, experience homelessness. In Canada, 20% of all people experiencing homelessness are between the ages of 13 and 24 years, and on any given night, between 6,000 - 7,000 young people are experiencing homelessness.

For many young people who identify as LGBTQ2S, the chance to live as a teen and grow into adulthood in a safe and healthy way is often undermined by the persistence of homophobia and transphobia, which can occur in the home, the community and schools, and through many of the public and private services that are intended to support young people.

Homophobia and transphobia lead to many LGBTQ2S youth being in situations where it is no longer safe or tenable for them to remain in their homes, schools and communities. In other words, homophobia and transphobia are major contributing factors to youth homelessness (Abramovich, 2012, 2016; Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015; Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Durso & Gates, 2012; Kipke, Weiss, & Wong 2007; Ferguson & Maccio, 2015). While LGBTQ2S youth make up 5 to 10% of the general population, it is estimated they make up 20–40% of the overall homeless youth population (Crossley, 2015; Josephson & Wright, 2000; O'Brien, Travers, & Bell, 1993; Quintana, Rosenthal, & Krehely, 2010).

What is and should be the role of public policy in this? There are many ways to think about what policy can and should achieve, and what its role should be in furthering public interests at the government, community and institutional levels. If the goals of good public policy include justice, the defence of human rights, and the enhancement of inclusion,

respect and well-being for individuals and communities, a question to be asked is how does—or, more importantly, how should—policy address the needs and interests of LGBTQ2S youth, in particular those who are at-risk of or experiencing homelessness? In this chapter, we will explore the relationship between homophobia and transphobia, and the experience of youth homelessness, and provide a way of thinking about how sound public policy may enhance the inclusion and well-being of all young people, especially LGBTQ2S youth.

### **Tracing the Link Between Homophobia, Transphobia and Youth Homelessness**

There is a considerable body of research identifying that LGBTQ2S youth are overrepresented in the youth homelessness population (Abramovich, 2012, 2013, 2016; Choi et al., 2015; Cochran et al., 2002; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Gaetz, O’Grady, Kidd, & Schwan, 2016; O’Brien et al., 1993).

The recent first national survey on youth homelessness in Canada, *Without a Home*, revealed that 29.5% of youth experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ2S (Gaetz et al., 2016, p. 31). While transgender people make up less than 0.5% of the Canadian population, transgender youth and gender non-binary youth are considerably overrepresented in the population of young people experiencing homelessness, at 1.8% and 2.5%, respectively (Bauer et al., 2015). Compared with heterosexual and cisgender young people experiencing homelessness, research demonstrates that LGBTQ2S youth typically face more adverse circumstances contributing to their homelessness. “Transgender and LGBTQ2S youth are more likely to leave home at an early age. These youth are also much more likely to report parental conflict and childhood physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse as contributing factors to their homelessness” (Gaetz et al., 2016, p. 8).

So, what is the link between being young and experiencing homelessness, and identifying as LGBTQ2S? Clearly, the experiences of homophobia and transphobia have an impact on the lives of young people in communities across Canada, the United States, and elsewhere. Such experiences can lead to important ruptures in the family, in some cases resulting in emotional abuse and outright rejection by other family members (Ray, 2006). LGBTQ2S youth in general, and transgender youth in particular, may also experience threats to their inclusion and safety in the community and at school (Higgins, 2016; Taylor & Peter,

2011). Discrimination may result in challenges to accessing health care and mental health and social supports. Discrimination can also lead to barriers in obtaining employment, education and housing. All these factors limit opportunities, lead to distress and exclusion, and undermine housing stability, with the result that it may be undesirable, unsafe or even impossible for a young person to remain at home or in their communities. With limited supports and nowhere to go, many young people eventually wind up homeless.

For LGBTQ2S youth, things don't necessarily get better once they are on the streets. Abramovich (2016) notes that: "Compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts, LGBTQ2S youth face increased risk of physical and sexual exploitation, mental health difficulties, substance use, HIV risk behaviours, and suicide (Denomme-Welch, Pyne, & Scanolon, 2008; Durso & Gates, 2012; Ray, 2006)" (Abramovich, 2016, p. 87). The *Without a Home* study found that LGBTQ2S youth reported more mental health concerns, including depression and attempted suicide (Gaetz et al., 2016 p.65). They were also more likely to experience criminal victimization while homeless, including physical and sexual assault (Gaetz et al., 2016, p. 81).

Given the clear overrepresentation of LGBTQ2S youth in the population of youth experiencing homelessness, and the considerable adversity they experience on the streets when compared with their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts, it is worth exploring how the community and the youth homelessness sector have responded to their needs.

Unfortunately, the homophobia and transphobia that young people have experienced in their past often continue in the service environment. This process begins with what Abramovich (2016) calls the "institutional erasure" of sexual and gender minority youth through policies and practices that make heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions (Abramovich, 2016; Namaste, 2000; Serano, 2007). Crisis services for youth experiencing homelessness, from emergency shelters to day programs to health care services, often operate on these assumptions. The outcome is that LGBTQ2S individuals, and their needs and unique circumstances are ignored "by not including them in key forms, reports and the day-to-day operations of programs, institutional rules and policies that do not consider or include LGBTQ2S identities, particularly transgender identities" (Abramovich, 2016, p. 88). Transgender and gender-expansive youth face additional barriers when attempting to access and successfully engage in housing-related services and programs. Service institutions are often rooted in cisnormative assumptions (Shelton, 2015). For instance, shelters, services and day programs are often segregated based on a binary male and female

service dichotomy, without policies and practices to accommodate or even acknowledge the experiences and needs of young people who do not fit heteronormative or cisnormative categories. Abramovich argues that the exclusion of LGBTQ2S identities from key forms and processes (e.g., intake, assessment, case management) further reinforces for staff the invisibility of LGBTQ2S identities and the idea that the needs of LGBTQ2S youth are not a priority. In environments where youth may be exposed to encounters and experiences with young people and staff that undermine their dignity, safety and well-being, it is possible that those in helping professions are not positive supporters or even neutral observers, but instead a significant part of the problem. If homelessness services actively participate in reproducing the homophobia and transphobia that contribute to youth homelessness in the first place, we have to ask ourselves: What is the necessary policy context that will ensure all young people, regardless of their gender and sexual identities, get what they need to help them move forward in their lives in the safest, healthiest and most inclusive way possible?

## **The Role of Inclusive Public Policy in Addressing the Needs of LGBTQ2S Youth**

Let's begin by talking about what we mean by policy. Simply put, policy provides guidance and direction for the delivery of services and programs for the public. Procedures follow to describe how policy will be put into action and what methods of accountability will ensure follow-through. Most people associate policy with the actions of government, but policy also applies to how communities and institutions address issues and problems.

Policy decisions take into consideration a wide range of factors, including existing laws and the constitution, values, tradition, public opinion, current circumstances and expediency, emerging and existing national and local priorities, research and evidence, and the ideological predisposition of elected officials (Anderson, 2015; Davies, 2004). The point is, there is no singular goal for public policy, and the factors that influence its development and implementation vary.

In this context, it is fair to say the very role of public policy in advancing an inclusive or social justice agenda is contested, as there is not widespread agreement on the role of public policy in furthering these agendas (Craig, Burchardt, & Gordon, 2008). However, if both human rights and homelessness are areas of concern for public policy in Canada and the United States, let us make the claim here that policy should also be a key consideration in addressing youth

homelessness. That is, the goal of good public policy should include justice, the defence of human rights, and the enhancement of inclusion, respect and well-being for individuals and communities. There are four lenses through which we should view effective and inclusive policies addressing the needs of LGBTQ2S youth: Human Rights, Equity, Positive Youth Development and Youth Voice. These should become the key pillars of an effective policy.

- **Human Rights:** Inclusion and a participatory approach to decision-making give those directly affected a seat at the table with decision-makers, while a focus on accountability and accessing remedies helps to distinguish roles and responsibilities. We begin with the assertion that youth homelessness exists because basic human rights of young people have been denied and this must be remedied through effective policy, laws and practice.<sup>1</sup> Our approach to meeting the needs of LGBTQ2S youth should also be framed in terms of international human rights obligations,<sup>2</sup> and be grounded in a human rights framework that will inform all stages of policy development, implementation and evaluation. A human rights approach requires a paradigm shift, so that instead of creating laws that discriminate against or punish youth, especially LGBTQ2S youth, all levels of government must urgently address the systemic causes of youth homelessness and provide legal protections for their human rights, including the right to housing.
- **Equity:** The word equity refers to the principle of fairness. This should seem obvious, but it is often misunderstood. In my conversations with service providers, I have often heard this claim made: “We don’t have a problem with LGBTQ2S youth because we welcome everyone—we treat everyone the same.” While on the surface laudable, this kind of thinking reflects a common confusion between equity and equality, assuming they mean the same thing. Equality means treating everyone the same, regardless of differences. Equity means acknowledging privilege versus the marginalization that some individuals experience, and then ensuring that people are not only actively included, but also have their needs met based on their experiences and circumstances. Equity also acknowledges that structural factors such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, homophobia and transphobia exist, and create unique challenges and exclusionary practices that must be acknowledged and directly addressed through policy and practice. Rather than simply treating everyone the same, an equity framework therefore demands a more proactive approach to inclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about a human rights approach to youth homelessness, see *Youth Rights, Right Now! Ending Youth Homelessness: A Human Rights Guide* (2016), published by Canada Without Poverty; A Way Home Canada; Canadian Observatory on Homelessness; Feantsa. <http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/YouthRightsRightNow-final.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> A number of international human rights agreements, signed by Canada, define rights relevant to homeless youth. Four core United Nations documents are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

- **Positive Youth Development:** Adolescents and young adults go through many developmental changes. This can include physical, cognitive, social and experiential changes. A *Positive Youth Development* approach means that in our effort to enhance the skills, abilities and opportunities of young people, our consideration goes well beyond risk, danger and challenges, and also builds on strengths and assets that young people possess. Policies, programs and practices should focus on increasing protective factors and resilience. For LGBTQ2S youth, this means their varied gender and sexual identities must be seen, not as problematic and connected to negative outcomes, but positively, so that LGBTQ2S identities, spaces and environments are created and supported. The goal of policy, then, is not simply to protect LGBTQ2S youth from harm, but to create a context where they are respected for who they are, and their identities are celebrated and welcomed.
- **The Youth Voice:** Developing and implementing effective policy and quality assurance practices must involve the voices and input of LGBTQ2S youth. It needs to be acknowledged and understood that LGBTQ2S youth have both a unique understanding of the factors that contributed to their homelessness and what the homelessness sector can do to offer a more supportive and effective response. In thinking about the youth voice, it is also important to consider diversity among LGBTQ2S youth. This is not a homogeneous population. For instance, trans youth will have different experiences, concerns, needs and challenges than lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. Some young people will be doubly and triply marginalized as racialized youth, young women, Indigenous youth or because they are newcomers. A thoughtful and inclusive approach to engaging young people in a meaningful way will take this into account.

## Policy into Action

In thinking about how to respond to LGBTQ2S youth homelessness, we must tie it to a broader vision of how to address homelessness. There are three things we can do to address homelessness. First, we can prevent it from happening in the first place by addressing the drivers of homelessness. Second, we need emergency services of some kind, because no matter how good our prevention strategies are, some people will slip through the cracks, and some will be in crisis situations and require emergency services. Third, we need to help young people move out of homelessness as quickly as possible, by providing appropriate housing and supports to ensure they do not experience homelessness again.

### ***Government Policy***

The role of government in addressing the needs and circumstances of LGBTQ2S youth who experience or are at risk of homelessness begins with an acknowledgement of the rights of such young people to housing, safety, dignity, access to education, health care, and other supports and freedom from discrimination. Government can support the development and implementation of institutional policy at the community and organizational level. But government can also play a much bigger role. If we want to shift from simply ‘managing’ the crisis to preventing and ending youth homelessness, we need to consider the role of higher levels of government. This shift is key, because for gender-expansive and sexual-minority youth, it makes more sense to work to support young people and their families, so they can build natural supports and stay in place in their communities until they choose to leave in a safe and planned way—in essence, avoid homelessness altogether.

The prevention of youth homelessness must involve policies, programs and practices designed to reduce the risk of youth becoming homeless. This may involve working upstream through policies and legislation that are considered universal in scope because they address discrimination in general, and homophobia and transphobia in particular. It means ensuring that government does not make matters worse through policy and legislation that, in practice, promotes or enables homophobia and transphobia. These are considered universal prevention strategies because they apply to the population as a whole, while not designated “homelessness prevention,” can have the intended or unintended outcome of reducing the risk of homelessness for many youth.

Selected prevention involves more targeted strategies aimed at institutions with which young people regularly engage, including, among others, the educational system, community programming and services, health care and employment. This is key, because it is known that LGBTQ2S youth often experience “barriers and challenges to accessing health care and support services due to a lack of LGBTQ2S culturally competent staff and homophobic and transphobic discrimination” (Abramovich, 2012). School is particularly important because this is the institution that virtually all youth attend at some point, and it can be either a place that is supportive and inclusive, or sites of discrimination and bullying. School-based anti-discrimination and anti-bullying programming must specifically and explicitly address homophobia and transphobia, and schools should be mandated to implement strategies of inclusion.

For young people at imminent risk of homelessness, there are a range of early intervention strategies that focus on preventing young people from becoming homeless, and if they do experience homelessness, ensuring the experience is as brief as possible. Targeted and place-based early intervention and place-based case management, such as *Youth Reconnect* programs, provide young people and their families with supports once a young person has been identified as being at risk of homelessness. Government funding and policy to support such programming helps young people stay in place in their communities and obtain the supports they need. *Family First* approaches are critical, because family breakdown and the rejection of young people based on their gender, sexual orientation, or both, are key drivers of homelessness. There are early intervention programs of this type in several communities in North America that involve family mediation and supports, and efforts to help parents shift from rejecting to embracing their youth. Early intervention may also involve shelter diversion strategies, such as *Host Home* programs to provide short- or long-term sanctuary for LGBTQ2S youth in their communities, so they can remain connected to school and the natural supports they may have in their local area. A condition of funding for all such programming must be that services are LGBTQ2S-positive, safe and affirming, with ongoing training and support for staff, and accountability measures in place to ensure compliance.

Higher levels of government often provide funding for local community services. Again, government policy must ensure funding goes to institutions and organizations that proactively address homophobia and transphobia through institutional policy, practice and training (more on this below).

Finally, there is no way to predict where a young person will show up in the system, so it is imperative to make sure there is no ‘wrong door’ for young people seeking help. Government policy and funding must be aligned in a way to ensure LGBTQ2S youth have access to targeted supports if that is what they want, but the system must also be equipped to support all young people in a manner that is competent, positive, and affirming of LGBTQ2S youth. If homophobia and transphobia are drivers of youth homelessness, it is incumbent on government—municipal, provincial, territorial, state and federal—not to directly or implicitly support programming or institutions that further harm, through discriminatory practices, the very young people they putatively want to support.



## Organizational and Institutional Policy

In most North American communities, the response to homelessness can be characterized as a crisis response, which relies largely on emergency services, so let's start there. Emergency services can include emergency shelters, day programs, transitional housing, and targeted services and supports, including health care, employment, housing supports, life skills, and others. It is these services young people experience first-hand, so the role of inclusionary institutional policy at the community and organization levels must be considered.

An inclusionary policy to support LGBTQ2S youth should include service standards that require service providers to develop and implement non-discriminatory policies, practices and training as a condition of funding. Such policies will support organizations to provide inclusive and LGBTQ2S-positive services and environments. A good resource to support this work is the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness' *LGBTQ2S Toolkit*.<sup>3</sup> This comprehensive toolkit identifies institutional standards for organizations working with youth experiencing homelessness. The toolkit argues that organizational policy should acknowledge LGBTQ2S youth and, from a practice perspective, should address their needs in compliance with the four pillars of inclusion. All organizations—including shelters, day programs, transitional and *Housing First for Youth* programs—need to put in place standards and practices that focus on the dignity, safety and inclusion of youth. This means that where possible (acknowledging that smaller communities may not have an extensive infrastructure) young people have options, including facilities that specifically target and cater to the needs of LGBTQ2S youth. At the same time, all other services should also conform to inclusive standards, because LGBTQ2S youth may prefer those other options. Finally, the unique needs of transgender and gender non-binary youth must be acknowledged and addressed.

From a practice perspective, this means providing welcoming, affirming and safe spaces for all young people, regardless of their gender and sexual identities. As part of this strategy, organizations need to work toward designing and implementing intake, assessment and case management processes that respect gender diversity, and provide gender inclusive programs, washrooms and service areas. Organizations should put in place appropriate and diverse resources, including program and support options that target the needs of LGBTQ2S youth and help young people access similar resources outside each organization.

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<sup>3</sup>To access the toolkit visit <http://lgbtq2stoolkit.learningcommunity.ca/>

The *LGBTQ2S Toolkit* also highlights the importance of ongoing commitment to training and professional support for staff. This includes how to address homophobia and transphobia on the part of both clients and staff, and a basic understanding of how “LGBTQ2S youth interact with their environments and how their environments interact with them” (National Learning Community, 2016). Training must be comprehensive and ongoing, not one-time only, because many service environments may have numerous part-time staff and considerable staff turnover.

Finally, a key feature of any inclusive policy and strategy is accountability. Organizations need to put in place accountability measures to ensure compliance, including employment standards, ongoing evaluation and a formal complaints/grievance procedure that is safe and responsive to the needs of LGBTQ2S youth.

## Conclusion

It is well established that LGBTQ2S youth are overrepresented in the youth homelessness population, and that this is largely an outcome of the persistence of homophobia and transphobia in our society. Understanding the causes and drivers of youth homelessness suggests that, not only do we know what to do, but that as a society we are compelled to do it. Sound public policy can support and direct the development and implementation of solutions that attend to the needs of gender and sexual minority youth, but it can also ensure the system as a whole does not replicate or amplify the homophobia and transphobia that young people experience leading up to their homelessness. The case study presented following this chapter offers examples of what an inclusive government policy can look like. Organizations working with young people must address these issues from a policy, practice and training perspective. Failure to do so means that services and institutions become part of the problem.

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Dr. Gaetz is a leading international researcher on homelessness, and is director of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness at York University. He focuses his efforts on conducting research and mobilizing this knowledge so as to have a greater impact on solutions to homelessness. Stephen has played a leading international role in knowledge dissemination in the area of homelessness through the Homeless Hub.