

# Egale Youth Outreach

Literature Review

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## Overview

LGBTQI2S youth are greatly overrepresented in the homeless youth population. This review critically analyzes LGBTQI2S youth homelessness evidence, focusing on (a) current Canadian definitions and pathways (b) barriers to navigating systems of care, (c) individual outcomes for LGBTQI2S youth homelessness (d) recommendations and (e) recent development across Canada. The literature is predominantly focused on the North American or Western European context and specific to Ontario, where possible.

## Canadian Definitions & Pathways

### LGBTQI2S Youth Homelessness

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (2012) defines *homelessness* as “the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means, and ability of acquiring it” (p. 1). Gaetz, O’Grady, Buccieri, Karabanow, and Marsolais (2013) broadened the definition of youth homelessness to encompass other developmental implications:

*“Youth aged 13 to 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers and importantly lack many of the social supports that we typically deem necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood. In such circumstances, young people do not have a stable or consistent source of income or place of residence, nor do they necessarily have adequate access to support networks to foster a safe and nurturing transition into the responsibilities of adulthood” (p. 7).*

Young people experiencing homelessness make up 20% of the homeless population in Canada (Gaetz, Gulliver, & Richter, 2014), 20-40% of that comprising of LGBTQI2S people (Crossley, 2015; Josephson & Wright, 2000; Quintana et al., 2010). It has been well documented that one of the main drivers of LGBTQI2S youth homelessness is a direct result of long-term processes of family/social disintegration where normative adolescent development and disclosure of LGBTQI2S identity exacerbated pre-existing conflict (Castellanos, 2016). Exact estimates are unknown, but some studies report that anywhere from 8% (Rosenthal et al., 2006) to 33% (Rosario, Scrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012b) of homeless LGBTQI2S youth leave home as a way to mitigate conflict. We also find that LGBTQI2S youth are more likely to experience both physical and sexual abuse in the home (Cochran et al., 2002) and are more likely to enter homelessness at an earlier age (Moon et al., 2000) compared to homeless heterosexual youth.

## Barriers Transitioning Into Homelessness

### Shelters and Housing Services

Depending on where one falls on the LGBTQI2S spectrum, there are many different ways transitioning into systems of homelessness compounds, especially as identities of gender and sexuality intersect with race, ability and status. Generally speaking, research out of the UK has found that 60

percent of trans people and more than a third of LGBTQ people do not feel safe in their neighborhood (Meredith, 2018). When transitioning into social housing, it was found that 40% reported that provider staff did not meet their needs or were sensitive to their LGBTQ concerns (House Proud, 2017).

The 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). In the literature, we find that conversation is mostly focused on the gender dichotomy most often found in shelter systems. When shelters are set up on a gender binary (not only in washrooms and change rooms, but also as a “prerequisite” to access the shelter itself), it affects transgender individuals, who are left to make calculated decisions balancing risk, abuse and identity expression (National Centre for Transgender Equality, 2011). The hostility and erasure can become so volatile that some youth have stated that they would sometimes rather sleep on the street (Abramovich, 2013; Cull et al., 2006). Transgender youth, especially young transgender women of color and Two-Spirit peoples, are among the most discriminated against groups in the shelter system, often dealing simultaneously with transphobia, homophobia, and racism (Price et al., 2016; Quintana, Rosenthal, & Krehely, 2010; Sakamoto et al., 2010).

Further, the bureaucracy of the shelter system also works against LGBTQI2S youth who experience homelessness, as it provide little protections when a violation occurs. For example, based upon City of Toronto emergency shelter standards, shelter staff are required to complete reports should an incident occur, which are reviewed and followed up by the executive staff. In both cases, staff hold quite a bit of subjectivity in their roles with regards to their duty to report and follow up. Without proper education, care or attention, they are unlikely to categorize incidents as “homophobic” or “transphobic” as they occur. This erasure also feeds into another widely held misconception within the shelter system: that there are little-to-no LGBTQI2S youth residents utilizing services, simply because gender and sexual identity indicators are not often collected during the intake procedures (Abramovich, 2017).

## Education and Employment Services

As young people begin exploring and experimenting with their identity in early adolescent years, the rejection they might experience from family or friends often comes at the cost of formal academic preparation. In high school, LGBTQI2S youth are less likely to have consistent attendance and more likely to perform poorly than heterosexual youth (Coolhart & Brown, 2017). Homelessness service providers have recognized the lack of GED preparation services, technical trainings and mentorship opportunities that are tailored to LGBTQI2S youth needs. For those who wish to pursue post-secondary education after graduation, it has also been documented that financial, housing or emotional supports (that often comes from family and peers) is also not always a guarantee.

As we know, a disruption in education has a rippling effect in achieving employment stability, two social determinants that are critical to housing. In one study, LGBTQI2S youth expressed multiple challenges in preparing for employment, such as difficulties preparing for an interview; access to interview clothes and work uniforms, and attaining a driver's license. Many hiring models also make it difficult for those with a criminal background, no prior work experience, active substance use and lack of

documentation to even get their foot in the door. When on the job, it is also not uncommon for LGBTQI2S youth to experience stigma, harassment and discrimination.

These experiences are compounded with the rise of precarious labor in Ontario over the past 30 years (Wilson et al. 2011), intensifying a post-Fordist labour market in late capitalism (Lewis et al. 2015). In Ontario today, we see this generally in an increase of short-term, part-time, seasonal or casual employment contracts that are low overhead to the employer, offering little to no work protections, insurance coverage or sick days (Wilson et al. 2011). As labor markets and economic conditions continue to rise in Ontario (specifically in urban cores where many homelessness services exist), it places additional challenges to finding stable housing at market rent, let alone stable employment. For those who are homeless in rural spaces, they are often left with a choice between travelling to urban cores to access homelessness services or staying where housing is more affordable, with little supports.

## Individual Outcomes

Given these contextual factors contributing to systemic homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and other forms of discrimination, there exists a generous body of research highlighting the plethora of individual characteristics one can possibly attribute to LGBTQI2S youth homelessness. While we won't go into exhaustive detail for the purpose of this literature review, we will highlight some important trends. Most of the literature tends to circle around three interconnected outcomes of mental health that are different from heterosexual youth: (a) mood disorders, (b) suicidal ideation and self-harm, and (c) substance use.

For example, comparing homeless LGBTQI2S and heterosexual youth, LGBTQI2S youth reported a greater number of depressive symptoms, posttraumatic stress disorder, somatic complaints, delinquency and aggression (Clatts et al., 2005; Cochran et al., 2002; Gangamma et al., 2008; Gattis, 2011; Grafsky, Letcher, Slesnick, & Serovich, 2011; Whitbeck, Chen, et al., 2004). Suicidal behavior appeared to be strongly related to sexual orientation. Homeless LGBTQI2S youth were more likely than homeless heterosexual youth to have considered suicide (Gattis, 2011), have made a plan about committing suicide (Gattis, 2011), and have suicidal ideations (Rohde et al., 2001; Whitbeck, Chen, et al., 2004). When concerned with substance use, homeless LGBTQI2S youth were more likely than homeless heterosexual youth to have used substances (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2011; Salomonsen-Sautel et al., 2008; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006), to have used a variety of substances (Cochran et al., 2002; Frederick et al., 2011; Gattis, 2011), have an earlier onset of drug use (Moon et al., 2000), and to have lifetime substance abuse (Salomonsen-Sautel et al., 2008).

## A Quick Note on Methodology

It is also worth knowing that we see some methodological incongruencies that has an effect on the integrity of the data. Firstly, there is a lack of standardized sampling procedures across the studies, which indicates that some studies are only capturing a small portion of the youth homeless population, particularly those studies reliant on homeless shelter users. What is lacking across the majority of studies is an attempt to capture the "hidden homeless," such as the provisionally accommodated, or those at risk of homelessness (Ecker, 2016). As such, we assume that statistics presented in the literature are

conservatively estimated, given that the broadness of our youth homelessness definition did not always match the methodology of the study.

There are additional methodological considerations when sampling and labelling the “LGBTQI2S” population. Health and homelessness research has a long history of predominantly focusing on gay/lesbian cisgender people (Panfil, Barnhard & Greathouse, 2017). As a result, folks whose experiences don’t always fit nicely into such prescribed labels (particularly those who identify as non-monosexual, trans or non-binary) are often underrepresented, if accounted for at all. For example, we could not find any Canadian studies that specifically looked at Two-Spirit or intersex homelessness, even though it has been well cited that Indigenous peoples are overrepresented in this population. Given the many expressions young LGBTQI2S people are presenting today (and perhaps always have), it is critical that our research methodologies reflect this to ensure everyone is represented accurately.

Outside of methodologies specific to one study or another, Canadian research as a whole has yet to support this hidden homeless population by meaningfully centering it as a research priority. While many large scale studies on homelessness may have an LGBTQI2S component, it is rarely the focus. One national study 18 years ago estimated that 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQI2S (Josephson & Wright, 2000), while large scale data collection remains limited to this day. Point-in-time counts have become an increasingly popular way of collecting data on homelessness, but only recently have some methodologies ensured that they systematically capture gender or sexual indicators. In addition to this, researchers have publicly speculated the ways in which shelters choose not to partake in research about LGBTQI2S homelessness, either because they don’t think it’s relevant or they fear the ramifications of coming forward and speaking about these issues (Ambramovich, 2017). The gap in consistent and reliable data inevitably impairs our collective understanding of what LGBTQI2S youth homelessness looks like, and how to best tailor services.

## Common Recommendations

### Staff training in shelters

The most common recommendation presented in the literature was the need for staff training regarding youth sexuality. Being aware of the complexities of sexual identity formation has important implications for assessment, treatment, and referrals (Nelson, 1997; Ryan, 2003; Saewyc et al., 2006). The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2009) outlined several recommendations for both front-line workers and program managers that could be effective with a homeless LGBTQI2S youth population. To set an example, staff should advocate for nondiscrimination policies at their organizations and speak up when encountering homophobia or transphobia in the workplace. Program managers should strive to create a supportive environment for LGBTQI2S youth by using affirmative language and images on program materials and ensure that their organizations have nondiscrimination policies within their mandates (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016).

In addition, shelters should allow individuals to access the shelter that corresponds with how they self-identify or the facilities that they feel safest using (National Centre for Transgender Equality, 2011). Furthermore, shelter-specific policies should allow youth to identify their own sexuality, gender, preferred names, and pronouns (Abramovich, 2013; Cull et al., 2006; Hunter, 2008). There should be appropriate resources for youth on sexuality and gender issues and referrals to specialized services.

## Family Based Interventions

Another frequently cited preventive intervention was family-based interventions. Providing family therapy that includes discussions of sexual identity was thought to help adolescents and their families in understanding the coming-out process (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2011). This type of intervention could help reconnect youth with their families (Gattis, 2011) or serve as a preventative measure to reduce the likelihood of a LGBTQI2S youth leaving home as a result of family conflict (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2011). Preventative interventions that address sexuality issues could also be offered to family members separately while the youth is placed in emergency, short term foster care placement (Walls et al., 2007). Other targeted interventions included a focus on substance use (Cochran et al., 2002) and suicide prevention (Cochran et al., 2002; Ream et al., 2012). To ensure that homeless LGBTQI2S youth are aware of these services, it was thought that outreach efforts should be targeted at areas where homeless LGBTQI2S youth congregate (Walls et al., 2007). As an aside, it is also important to recognize that the modality of such counselling sessions must be grounded in a youth-centered LGBTQI2S rights approach, as conversion therapy on minors has been legally banned in Ontario since 2015 (Bill 77, 2015).

## Policy and Programming

More and more, policy makers are beginning to frame youth homelessness as a violation of human rights more than a weakness of character (Canada Without Poverty, 2016). The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2011) recommends that residential service agencies should ensure that programs are safe and free from harassment. Given that gender identity, expression and sexual orientation are protected grounds for discrimination in both the Ontario Human Rights Code (Ontario Human Rights, 2018) as well as the Canadian Human Rights Act (Canadian Human Rights Act, 2018), these changes should come into effect for institutions that receive public funding. More broadly, Gaetz (2017) expands on 4 key considerations in addressing LGBTQI2S youth homelessness through effective public policy:

1. **Human Rights:** *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.*
2. **Equity:** *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.*
3. **Positive Youth Development:** *This approach looks to enhance the skills, abilities and opportunities of young people, and goes well beyond risk, danger and challenges. Policies, programs and practices should focus on increasing protective factors and resilience. The goal of policy, then, is not simply to protect LGBTQ2S youth from harm, but to create a context where their varied gender and sexual identities are respected, celebrated and welcomed.*

4. **The Youth Voice:** *Developing and implementing effective policy and quality assurance practices must involve the voices and input of LGBTQ2S youth. In thinking about the youth voice, it is also important to consider diversity among LGBTQ2S youth, as it is not a homogenous population. A thoughtful and inclusive approach to engaging young people in a meaningful way will take this into account. (pg. 313-314)*

These considerations call to the responsibility of high levels of government for shifting from simply managing the crises to preventing and ending youth homelessness. These broad shifts are key for LGBTQI2S youth, as it makes more sense to support young people so they can build natural supports and stay in place within their communities (Gaetz, 2017).

## Current Developments In Canada

There is a new bloom of targeted programs across Canada that seem promising, though their implementation appears to be ad-hoc and geographically dispersed, peppered in urban cores of various provinces. This is thought to be because of the lack of intentional federal funding. Below is a short list of current programs running:

- RainCity Housing and Support Social opened a comprehensive program in Vancouver that was deemed the first in Canada. They provide case management, housing referrals and other opportunities specifically for LGBTQI2S youth (Raincity Housing, 2018).
- In 2015, the city of Toronto agreed to update its shelter standards, and set aside funds to open two transitional housing shelters specifically for LGBTQI2S youth, one we now know of as Sprott House (Van Den Berg, 2017).
- Alberta became the first province to adopt a provincial strategy on LGBTQI2S youth homelessness in 2015 (Abramovich & French, 2017), bolstering programs such as Aura Host Homes, a project that pairs youth with local families (LGBTQ2S Toolkit, 2015).
- In 2018, the Salvation Army in Winnipeg has announced that it is specifically reserving beds for LGBTQI2S folks and their families within their shelter. However, there has been some speculation from local grassroots organization that question the integrity of this initiative, given they were not publicly consulted as well as the long history the Salvation Army has had towards anti-gay sentiment (Grabish, 2018).
- In 2014, Egale Youth Outreach opened its doors, offering counselling services and referrals to LGBTQI2S youth who are at risk of homelessness. It will join together services with the Egale Center, set to open by January 2019.
- While not in detail, we would also like to acknowledge the plethora of services across Canada that always have and will continue to serve LGBTQI2S homeless youth, but do not neatly fall under the homelessness service umbrella. Some notable organizations in Toronto include: Sherbourne Health Centre , Supporting Our Youth, The Black Queer Youth Initiative, Native Youth Sexual Health Network, Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention, Planned Parenthood Toronto, etc. Outside of their provision mandate, these services create a social blanket, expanding a support network outside of the homelessness system.

Because many of these initiatives are relatively new, there is little documented evidence that speaks to their effectiveness or impact on the homelessness service ecosystem. Moving forward, we hope that evaluation efforts such as this one will help shed light on these questions.

## Conclusion

LGBTQI2S youth represent a small fraction of our youth population, yet are overrepresented within our homeless population. The needs of LGBTQI2S youth differ from heterosexual youth, as they are much more likely to leave home as a result of family conflict. They continue to experience difficulties accessing services, as the homelessness system is often set up with heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions. The result of such often manifests in individual outcomes that make it difficult for LGBTQI2S homeless youth to achieve optimum health, safety and security. Given our affirmative changes in human rights legislation and (generally speaking) cultural attitudes both provincially and nationally, LGBTQI2S homelessness is now framed as a human rights violation, one that requires shelters, programs and family attitudes to change and be more accepting. LGBTQI2S youth have a lot of potential to achieve their dreams, if they are given the same opportunities, supports and protections as anyone else.



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