

## LETTER TO THE READER

Dear Reader,

*Where am I going to go? What am I going to do?* Throughout our careers, we've been asked these questions by LGBTQ2S young people experiencing homelessness a countless number of times. We've been asked versions of the same questions by service providers working with youth experiencing homelessness, advocates for LGBTQ2S youth, and policy makers—*Where do we go from here? What are we going to do?*

The problem of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness can overwhelm us if we let it. It is a big problem, involving other big problems, like poverty, racism, cissexism, transphobia, heterosexism, homophobia, and colonialism. We see the impact of these, and LGBTQ2S young people experiencing homelessness live the impact of these, every day. For example, some of us live in cities or provinces that are unwelcoming to LGBTQ2S people. This, in turn, may make the available services for LGBTQ2S young people equally as unwelcoming.

*Almost all LGBTQ people going into shelters have a fear of them, because it isn't a matter of if it's dangerous, but just how dangerous it will be.*

Many of us live in cities or provinces that are hostile toward Indigenous youth and Black youth, often resulting in violence toward youth of colour, stigma, and social isolation. Systems are often not designed to meet the specific needs of youth who have experienced multiple stigmas related to racism, homophobia, and transphobia. As such, providers working within these systems may not always understand how to meet the needs of youth with intersecting identities, leaving LGBTQ2S youth of colour experiencing homelessness with few places to turn to for support.

*As a queer person I can find a few resources which may help, but as a Black trans woman, the margins are even more narrow.*

Most of us live in places that criminalize the experience of homelessness. The notion that youth experiencing homelessness make the streets unsafe is still a widely held belief. Public discourse on crime and homelessness tends to revolve around youth experiencing homelessness as the perpetrators of crime, rather than the victims, which has been a key factor leading to the criminalization of homelessness. However, a major part of the problem

is that there is not nearly enough housing for youth experiencing homelessness, leaving young people with no choice but to fend for themselves. Youth are then criminalized for figuring out how to survive without any support or assistance; they are ticketed for sleeping outside, trespassing, and loitering. And when they engage in street economies to buy the things that they need, they are arrested.

*That's when I started getting in trouble, like, with the police and everything.*

So, *where do we go from here? What are we going to do?* If you've picked up this book, that is a good first step! In this volume you will find some of the latest research related to LGBTQ2S youth homelessness, as well as case studies of innovative program models that are working alongside LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness in Canada and the U.S. You will also have the opportunity to learn from several young people who have contributed to this book. We believe that those most impacted by LGBTQ2S youth homelessness—LGBTQ2S youth themselves—must be at the centre of conceptualizing and creating the solutions that will help us end LGBTQ2S youth homelessness.

As queer researchers with a profound understanding of family rejection and the complexities of coming out, as well as the relationship between coming out and homelessness, we are deeply connected to this work. Our relationship to this work has taught us about reflexivity and the importance of being reflective researchers.

We approached the creation of this book, much like we approach our everyday work, committed with a full heart. This is a project of love and hope. We put this book out into the world with the hope that it may help create a necessary shift, so that all young people have a safe place to call home, and that together we may work to end LGBTQ2S youth homelessness.

In solidarity,  
Alex & Jama

## **A FEW NOTES ABOUT LANGUAGE FOR THE READER**

A glossary of important terms used throughout the book can be found on page 354, however, we would like to clarify certain key terms that are integral to every chapter and case study in the book.

We have chosen to use the acronym LGBTQ2S throughout the book. This stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and two-spirit. At times, queer and trans will be used interchangeably with LGBTQ2S. Exceptions to the consistent use of LGBTQ2S include circumstances when the acronym did not accurately reflect the population of youth served in programs or cited in research, for example, when authors are citing specific research and case studies from programs that did not specifically include two-spirit youth.

We recognize that the terms youth use to name themselves may vary widely, and these terms may differ for youth in different geographic locations, and youth of different ages, races, gender and sexual identities, and those exposed to LGBTQ2S people and communities. From a practice perspective, we recommend that providers remain open and flexible in their language usage, creating opportunities for youth to name themselves, and affirming youth in the identities they name for themselves. One way to ensure youth are able to share their identities is by asking open-ended questions about sexual orientation and gender identity, and honouring the words youth share.

We have also used the phrase “youth experiencing homelessness” throughout the book. This is an intentional shift from the phrase “homeless youth.” Even though this can make for lengthier, and at times ‘clunkier’ sentences, this rephrasing marks an important ideological shift in the way we conceptualize homelessness. It makes us think about homelessness as an issue, rather than a condition. This person-first language can help break down damaging stereotypes about homelessness and can also inform the approach used to address homelessness.

The terms ‘youth’ and ‘young people’ are used throughout this book, and are meant to refer to people between adolescence and young adulthood. Youth-serving organizations typically categorize youth as being between the ages of 16 and 24 years, however, federal and municipal governments in Canada tend to define youth up to the age of 29 years. The definition of youth in the United States varies, based on the system with which youth

are involved. For example, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act specifies that youth are “not more than 21 years of age,” while the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development considers youth to include young people through the age of 24.

The Canadian definition of youth homelessness states:

*‘Youth homelessness’ refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/ or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence.*

*Youth homelessness is a complex social issue because as a society we have failed to provide young people and their families with the necessary and adequate supports that will enable them to move forward with their lives in a safe and planned way. In addition to experiencing economic deprivation and a lack of secure housing, many young people who are homeless lack the personal experience of living independently and at the same time may be in the throes of significant developmental (social, physical, emotional and cognitive) changes. As a result, they may not have the resources, resilience, education, social supports or life skills necessary to foster a safe and nurturing transition to adulthood and independence. Few young people choose to be homeless, nor wish to be defined by their homelessness, and the experience is generally negative and stressful.*

*Youth homelessness is the denial of basic human rights and once identified as such, it must be remedied. All young people have the right to the essentials of life, including adequate housing, food, safety, education and justice (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016).*

Just as definitions of youth vary in the U.S., so do definitions of youth homelessness. Current definitions include:

***The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act***

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) defines homeless youth as individuals who are “not more than 21 years of age...for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative and who have no other safe alternative living arrangement.” This definition includes only those youth who are unaccompanied by families or caregivers.

***The U.S. Department of Education***

The U.S. Department of Education defines homeless youth as youth who “lack a fixed, regular, and night-time residence” or an “individual who has a primary night-time residence that is a) a supervised or publicly operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations; b) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill; or c) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.” This definition includes both youth who are unaccompanied by families and those who are homeless with their families.

***The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development***

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homelessness for their program by four categories. The categories are:

- “Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence (includes a subset for an individual who resided in an emergency shelter or a place not meant for human habitation and who is exiting an institution where he or she temporarily resided);
- Individuals and families who will imminently lose their primary night-time residence;
- Unaccompanied youth and families with children and youth who are defined as homeless under other federal statutes who do not otherwise qualify as homeless under this definition; and
- Individuals and families who are fleeing, or are attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member.”

We must acknowledge that numerous young people we have worked with over the years have reported not seeing themselves reflected in conventional definitions of homelessness. Some young people have described themselves as ‘street-involved.’ Others have described themselves as ‘lease-less’, but not homeless, even if they were staying in emergency shelters, couch-surfing, or living in other precarious situations. This was in part due to stigma, shame and pride.

*I didn't like people saying I was homeless. So I came up with the term 'home unfortunate.' And my definition for that term is, it's unfortunate I don't have a real home.*

This is an important insight that tells us the explanation of such a complex phenomenon as homelessness may not be fully captured in a definition. Perhaps a longer and more sustained explanation or account that captures the fluid nature, ever-changing circumstances and chronic instability under which LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness often live, can reveal and explain what it means to experience homelessness, as well as provide direction for action.

