

*Learning Network - Issue 24 | March 2018*

# LGBTQ2S\* YOUTH\*\*, VIOLENCE, AND HOMELESSNESS

\* Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning & 2-Spirit

\*\* Youth in this newsletter refers to those 13-24 years

This newsletter will:

- Describe the violence experienced by LGBTQ2S youth and its links with homelessness
- Discuss the impacts of violence and homelessness for LGBTQ2S youth
- Share the voices of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness through quotes from research conducted by Dr. Alex Abramovich
- Share community supports and promising practices for ending LGBTQ2S youth homelessness and violence

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There is an LGBTQ2S youth homelessness emergency in Canada.

25-40% of youth experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ2S compared to only 5-10% of Canadian youth who identify as LGBTQ2S.<sup>1</sup>

Reports caution that the proportion of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness may be much higher, given that many LGBTQ2S youth do not access shelters due to homophobia and transphobia and that many shelters do not collect data regarding sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous Peoples and racialized communities are overrepresented in the youth homeless population.<sup>3</sup> Data is needed on LGBTQ2S youth with invisible disabilities or a disability that is not immediately noticeable.

Canadian society is heteronormative and cisnormative.

We live in a heteronormative and cisnormative society, which often assumes that all people are cisgender (i.e. having a gender identity that matches with the sex you were assigned at birth). Heterosexual/straight and cisgender identities continue to be seen as “natural” and “normal”, whereas LGBTQ2S identities are pathologized/diagnosed and seen as in need of being “fixed”. These implicit and explicit assumptions result in the erasure of LGBTQ2S people. Such assumptions lead to discrimination, bullying, family conflict, health difficulties, systems failure, and violence against LGBTQ2S individuals.

## What does intersectional oppression look like?

LGBTQ2S youth belong to a variety of social locations based on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and immigration status. These social locations impact homelessness and violence. While this newsletter focuses on LGBTQ2S youth, these intersecting social locations and oppressions exist, and are highlighted throughout.

Language is important – find terms allies should know at:

- [Egale Canada](#)
- [Homeless Hub](#)
- [2spirits](#)

## PATHWAYS TO HOMELESSNESS FOR LGBTQ2S YOUTH

### Relational Violence

Violence against and the social exclusion of LGBTQ2S youth makes it very difficult to secure shelter, gain employment, and be safe from sexual, physical, and emotional violence and abuse.

Family conflict is the most frequently cited pathway to homelessness for all young people, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.<sup>4</sup> Identity-based family conflict resulting from a young person coming out as LGBTQ2S is the most common cause of homelessness for queer and trans youth. When a young person comes out to their family, they may be rejected and told they are no longer welcome in the family and forced to leave home. As such, family rejection becomes the most immediate threat to housing. That may, in part, be why LGBTQ2S youth are often at a younger age when they first experience homelessness.<sup>5</sup>

*“My dad found out about it, and was like: ‘Come out to the garage, I heard Vicky is gay. You can’t be friends with her anymore. You’re not gay are you?’ And I was like: ‘No, fuck no, of course not’, and he was like: ‘Okay good, cause if you were I would have to kill you.’ [...] That was when I was fourteen.”<sup>6</sup>*

Youth who are not safe in their home may have child welfare involvement. Indeed, LGBTQ2S youth were more likely to report involvement with child protection services than straight youth (62.8% vs. 55.8%).<sup>7</sup> Racialized and Indigenous youth are additionally over-represented in child welfare services.<sup>8</sup> This over-representation can be linked to colonialism and ongoing racism. Other threats to housing include intimate partner violence (IPV) wherein an individual inflicts emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse upon their partner. When an individual experiences IPV, the impacts on their housing can include not being safe in their home, confinement in their home, withholding of necessary medication and objects related to their gender transition and/or expression of their gender identity (e.g. hormones, binder, wig), being outed by their partner, or the theft of their property. For some LGBTQ2S youth, their partner may be the only one who is aware of their gender identity and sexual orientation.

*"IPV is intimately connected to male dominance and sexism even if an abuser is not male, because IPV occurs within a culture, created by men, that condones violence as a strategy for dominant people to control subordinate people."*<sup>9</sup>

There is widespread homophobia and transphobia in Canadian society and its institutions, including health care, justice, and schools. For example, a Canadian study on discrimination against LGBTQ2S youth in schools found:

- 64% of LGBTQ students reported feeling unsafe at school<sup>10</sup>
- 74% of trans students and 55% of sexual minority students reported having been verbally harassed about their gender expression<sup>11</sup>
- Sexual harassment in school was experienced by: 49% of trans students, 45% of students with LGBTQ parents, 43% of female bisexual students, 42% of male bisexual students, 40% of gay male students, and 33% of lesbian students<sup>12</sup>

LGBTQ2S youth report experiencing additional bullying, harassment, and isolation, due to race, social class, disability, etc.<sup>13</sup>

### **Colonialism**

Two-Spirit Indigenous youth face discrimination from heteronormative and cisnormative societal impositions, in addition to appropriation of the term two-spirit by those who are not Indigenous and do not understand it.<sup>14</sup>

Research reveals that prior to colonialization, two-spirited individuals were treated with respect in Indigenous communities and were given special and important roles in the community.<sup>15</sup> However, settlers judged those with a two-spirit identity as immoral, and subjected them to violence or death if they failed to conform to heteronormative and cisnormative norms, behaviours, and expectations. For instance, "Residential schools racialized native children as 'Indians' while enforcing strict divisions between girls and boys through European dress and hairstyles, as well as physically separating them in different dorms."<sup>16</sup> The impacts of prior colonial processes and continuing colonial acts suppress two-spirit traditions and understandings, and contribute to homelessness.

*"Yet despite widespread measures to enforce Western gender and sexual norms, Indigenous people have continued to live and embody nonbinary expressions of gender and sexuality and to resist assimilative strategies."*<sup>17</sup> – Sarah Hunt

[Click here to watch "Two Spirits, One Voice" – a video by Egale Canada with closed captions.](#)

### **Microaggressions**

Labelled as microaggressions, LGBTQ2S youth experience encounters daily where individuals stare, mock, and make derogatory comments towards them.<sup>18</sup> Comments such as 'Are you a man or a woman?' and 'You're bisexual? Can't you make up your mind?' are forms of discrimination and reflect a lack of knowledge and understanding of the LGBTQ2S community.

Other forms of microaggressions could include not being invited to parties, being picked last for sports teams, having individuals refuse to acknowledge you or your accomplishments. These microaggressions are draining and they can affect a young person's self-esteem and well-being.

### Intersectional Oppressions

Transphobia and homophobia lead to social exclusion.

Social exclusion is compounded and exacerbated by oppression from colonialism, racism, ableism, and systemic discrimination based on poverty, migration status, culture, and faith.

Intersecting oppressions compromise access to supports and services.

## THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ2S YOUTH SEEKING SAFE, AFFIRMING & INCLUSIVE SPACES

### Shelter

Safety concerns are a major factor in why LGBTQ2S youth do not access emergency shelters and housing programs. LGBTQ2S youth often report barriers such as judgement, violence, and being assigned a room and bathroom that does not match with their gender identity.

Additional barriers to securing housing experienced by youth and young adults include a lack of accessibility, no space for smudging, no shelters close enough to commute to work or to see friends, and no one at the shelter that speaks their language.

When LGBTQ2S youth do not or are not able to stay in housing programs, their safety is jeopardized as they navigate the risks of returning to an abusive setting, couch surfing, or sleeping outside (e.g. in the park, on the streets).

### Criminalization

Homelessness is criminalized in Canada through a variety of means including laws and policies restricting movement of those experiencing homelessness, discriminatory enforcement of laws, increased surveillance and policing of spaces used by those experiencing homelessness, increased incarceration, and discharging of youth who have been incarcerated without appropriate supports.<sup>19</sup> LGBTQ2S youth who are members of Indigenous communities or racialized communities face increased criminalization due to racism in Canadian institutions, including police forces.<sup>20</sup>

### Supports

Support services that are supposed to serve all individuals equally, often perpetuate the marginalization and oppression of LGBTQ2S people (e.g. heteronormativity, cisnormativity, homophobia, transphobia).<sup>21</sup> As such, LGBTQ2S youth often experience a lack of formal supports, such as LGBTQ2S inclusive and competent health care services.

For instance, the needs and concerns of trans and gender expansive youth (youth whose gender expressions expand beyond cisnormative identities) may differ from those of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, such as the need for hormones or gender affirming surgery.

LGBTQ2S youth living with disabilities and Deaf LGBTQ2S youth have particular difficulties in obtaining supports. Disability benefits are limited and the process of applying can be confusing and daunting. A study on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) found that 70% of project participants experiencing homelessness needed help obtaining the application. Additionally, 100% of project participants required help filling out the application due to the complexity of the process (e.g. medical forms, 90-day requirement for return of form).<sup>22</sup>

### Work

Living in precarious housing and on the streets makes it extremely difficult to secure formal employment because without a fixed address to provide employers with, and no place to rest, sleep, bathe, or eat, youth are left with few options for employment. LGBTQ2S youth find other means of informal employment, including squeegeeing, panhandling, selling drugs, and sex work.<sup>23</sup>

LGBTQ2S youth, especially trans and gender expansive youth, face increased challenges and barriers to securing employment.<sup>24</sup> For example, trans and gender expansive youth may not have government ID that matches with their gender identity, name, or pronouns.

While some trans people may choose sex work as their preferred work, it may be viewed as a survival strategy for others who are encountering barriers to more formalized employment opportunities.<sup>25</sup> For instance, in Ontario, 18% of trans people report being turned down for a job due to their trans identity, with an additional 32% of people being unsure if that is why they were turned down.<sup>26</sup>

### Housing

LGBTQ2S youth face additional and ongoing barriers in their efforts to find safe, secure, accessible, and affordable housing compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts.

Transgender youth, especially young transgender women of colour, experience some of the highest levels of discrimination and violence in housing programs and shelters.<sup>27</sup>

Indigenous LGBTQ2S youth also face housing issues stemming from the unjust taking of Indigenous land and a lack of support for Indigenous housing. Due to colonialism and a lack of funding, Indigenous housing on reserve or in rural and remote areas can be overcrowded or substandard (e.g. a lack of safe water). These precarious housing conditions have caused some LGBTQ2S youth to leave their home and community for housing in urban areas. A study found that 6.97% of the urban Indigenous population is homeless, as compared to a Canadian national average of 0.78%.<sup>28</sup>

## IMPACTS EXPERIENCED BY LGBTQ2S YOUTH

Studies report that youth experiencing homelessness face a variety of health and safety concerns that compromise their ability to secure housing, employment, and safety.

### Physical Health

- 34.7% of all youth experiencing homelessness report having little or no energy for everyday life (e.g. eating, drinking, bathing, cleaning, walking)<sup>29</sup>
- 29.4% of all youth experiencing homelessness report not having access to clean drinking water daily<sup>30</sup>

Outlined below are some of the negative implications affecting LGBTQ2S youth, as a result of homelessness and violence. All of these risks are intensified by the lack of LGBTQ2S competent, affirming, and safe resources, programs, and services.

### Victimization

- 77.9% of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness report experiencing criminal victimization (e.g. theft, sexual assault)<sup>31</sup>
- 35.6% of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness report having been sexually touched against their will during a 12 month period.<sup>32</sup> The person who did so could be a friend, family member, stranger, or others in the house where the youth was seeking shelter

### Mental Health

LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness report high rates of mental health issues and suicidality.<sup>33</sup>

National suicide rates for Indigenous Peoples are almost twice as high as that for the general population in Canada.<sup>34</sup> Related risk factors suggest that suicide rates are even higher for LGBTQ2S Indigenous youth. Risk can be decreased through cultural connection and an understanding of colonialism, as evidenced in [Suicide Prevention and Two-Spirited People](#).

LGBTQ2S asylum seekers also face heightened susceptibility to mental health issues due to pre- and post-migration experiences of war, genocide, starvation, the migration process, resettlement, social isolation, and discrimination also impacts mental health.<sup>35</sup>

## RESILIENCE IS BUILT

The following five building blocks were identified by LGBTQ2S youth and those working with them as key to constructing and strengthening resilience:<sup>36</sup>

- *Agency* – Feeling as though you can have an impact on your life and on the world around you.
- *Pride* – Feeling a sense of self-respect, accomplishment, or satisfaction with yourself.

- *Coping Skills* – The tools to adequately cope with different emotions and stressors
- *Community* – Having a sense of social inclusion and social capital through engagement with others.
- *Resources* – Access to basic needs such as housing, food, water, and transportation.

## PREVENTING AND ENDING LGBTQ2S YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

*The following is a hypothetical account based on experiences of LGBTQ2S youth.*

Coco applied for asylum in Canada to escape incarceration because she identifies as a trans woman. During the asylum process, Coco found it extremely difficult and stressful to prove and speak openly about her sexual orientation due to fears of reprisal, and concerns for her safety and the safety of her family.<sup>37</sup>

Once in Canada, Coco was informed that the house she had planned to stay at was already full and she found it difficult to find housing due to discrimination she faced in the housing market, due to transphobia and racism. Having no housing, Coco seeks asylum in a shelter.

From the moment Coco opened the shelter door, she felt excluded and was stared at by the residents. There were no indications that the space was trans inclusive. During intake, Coco was asked to identify herself as either a man or woman, with no other options.

When Coco explained to the staff that she is a trans woman, she was told that she looks more like a man and would therefore have to be assigned a room on the men's floor. Coco did not feel comfortable or safe sleeping on the men's floor or using the men's bathroom. She heard some of the male residents calling her names and noting how they planned to "do something" to her at night.

When Coco brought her concerns to the shelter staff, they were unsure how to respond because they were not provided with any training in this area or for this situation.

Feeling unsafe, Coco left the shelter and slept outside.

*The following six recommendations created by Dr. Alex Abramovich for Canada's first provincial strategy to address LGBTQ2S youth homelessness for the Government of Alberta. These recommendations are important considerations for all local, provincial, federal, and territorial governments.<sup>38</sup>*

- Support the delivery of LGBTQ2S specific housing options (development of new housing options and/or refinement of existing housing options)
- Support the delivery of population- based programs for LGBTQ2S youth that foster an intersectional approach (development of new programs and/ or programs within existing services)
- Create provincial housing/shelter standards that focus on working with and meeting the needs of LGBTQ2S young people

- Develop integrated, provincial training solutions for expanded staff training for all aspects of LGBTQ2S cultural competency
- Develop a prevention plan that emphasizes strategies on early intervention, awareness raising, and programs for children, youth, and families
- Develop the capacity for research that frames new approaches and solutions to LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness

## A CALL TO ACTION

Written by: Dr. Alex Abramovich

Although we live in a country that is often described as one of the safest in the world for LGBTQ2S people, many are surprised to hear that LGBTQ2S youth and young adult homelessness continues to be an emergency situation across the country, with up to 40 per cent of youth experiencing homelessness identifying as LGBTQ2S.

Over the years, I have worked with some of the most marginalized, excluded, and silenced young people in Toronto, and some of the most resistant service providers and decision makers. The systems that we currently have in place, which are meant to serve, protect, and support those in need, often perpetuate violence and discrimination against LGBTQ2S people. There have been some changes over the past year, but we are nowhere near where we should be.

It is shameful that as we begin 2018, all levels of government and key decision makers continue to argue the need for even more evidence that LGBTQ2S youth disproportionately experience homelessness and violence in shelters and support services.

Homophobic and transphobic violence and discrimination continues to create major barriers for LGBTQ2S youth attempting to access housing and shelter services. Not only do LGBTQ2S youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness in major urban settings across the country have few places to turn to for support, but also LGBTQ2S youth in rural communities frequently have nowhere to go.

When we don't ask inclusive questions, we erase people. People need to see themselves reflected in key forms, surveys, and research. Asking the right questions matters.

It is not enough to promise young people that it gets better. It only gets better when we make it better, which requires real action and a solid commitment from all levels of government. We cannot afford to wait another year.

Everyone deserves a safe place to call home.<sup>39</sup>

What to read next: [\*\*\*Where am I Going to Go?\*\*\*](#)

**Edited by:** Alex Abramovich and Jama Shelton

This book is the first academic text on LGBTQ2S youth homelessness in Canada and the United States. Published in 2017 by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, this book offers an important and original examination of this issue through a series of chapters and case studies, as well as shared experiences and wisdom of LGBTQ2S youth from Canada and the US.

## WAYS FORWARD

Directions	Promising Actions
It begins with human rights	<a href="#">Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights</a> is a international research and participatory documentary film project, working to advance social justice and equality for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) people.
Creating safe, affirming, and inclusive spaces	Kate Miller, Director of <a href="#">YMCA Sprott House</a> , found that “Many youth identified that their need to live in a place where their gender identity and sexuality was affirmed took priority over all other needs.” <sup>40</sup> YMCA Sprott House is the first LGBTQ2S transitional housing program for youth (16-24) in Canada and it opened its doors on February 1st, 2016.
Listening to LGBTQ2S youth	<a href="#">LGBT Youth Line</a> is a Queer, Trans, Two-Spirit* youth-led organization that affirms and supports the experiences of youth (29 and under) across Ontario. They provide anonymous peer support and referrals, train youth to provide support to other youth, and provide resources so youth can make informed decisions. Call: 1-800-268-9688 Text: 647-694-4275
Delivering services to LGBTQ2S newcomers	The <a href="#">Positive Spaces Initiative</a> was developed by <a href="#">Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants</a> to share resources and increase organizational capacity across the sector to more effectively serve LGBTQ newcomers.
Supporting youth in the Ontario child welfare system	The <a href="#">Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN)</a> and <a href="#">Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres</a> jointly developed a submission for the Ministry of Child and Youth Services on Supporting Two-Spirited and Indigenous LGTTQQIA Youth in the Ontario Child Welfare System. <a href="#">Additionally see the NYSHN's Two-Spirit Resource Guide.</a>

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[www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/issue-24-lgbtq2s-youth-violence-andhomelessness](http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/issue-24-lgbtq2s-youth-violence-andhomelessness)

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- <sup>39</sup> Originally published in Huffington Post Canada. To read more: [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/alex-ilona-abramovich/lgbtq2s-youth-across-canada-deserve-a-safe-place-to-call-home\\_a\\_23310700/](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/alex-ilona-abramovich/lgbtq2s-youth-across-canada-deserve-a-safe-place-to-call-home_a_23310700/)
- <sup>40</sup> Miller, Kate. 2017. “YMCA Sprott House: Creating a Better Space for LGBTQ2S Youth in Toronto” in *Where Am I Going to Go? Intersectional Approaches to Ending LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness in Canada & the U.S.* by Abramovich, Alex, & Shelton, Jama. (Eds.). Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, p.170. Available online: <http://homelesshub.ca/whereamigoingtogo>