

# 10 CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD

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*All young people, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, deserve a safe and supportive environment in which to achieve their full potential.*

Harvey Milk

The Canadian and American federal governments have increased their efforts to address youth homelessness in recent decades, primarily through funding direct service programs that are responsive to the needs of youth experiencing homelessness. These national responses are valuable and necessary, yet they are not sufficient, for the following reasons:

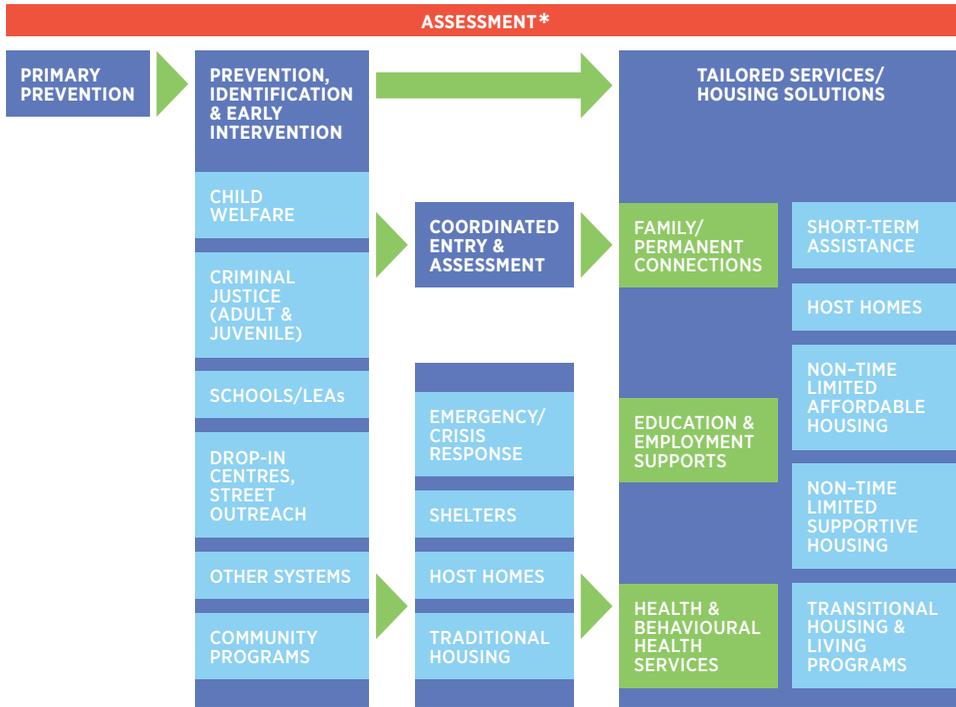
- Programs often lack a targeted, specialized response to LGBTQ2S youth, who face a unique set of challenges both before and during their experiences of homelessness, as well as when attempting to exit from homelessness.
- In their failure to enact non-discrimination policies inclusive of sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression, federal funding mechanisms do not ensure access to homelessness intervention programs for LGBTQ2S youth.
- Many program staff are not knowledgeable about the experiences of transgender youth, and as a result are not able to work with transgender youth in an affirming manner.
- Most funded programs focus on responding to the needs of youth once they are out of their homes, rather than preventing them from experiencing homelessness in the first place.
- Youth homelessness programs often do not address poverty, which is inextricably linked to homelessness and long-term housing stability.

The programs featured in this book, and others in Canada and the United States (U.S.), save the lives of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness. They often work with insufficient funding, sometimes in hostile local and national political climates, to meet the needs of far too many LGBTQ2S young people who are reliant upon them. They are leaders in addressing homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, cissexism, colonialism, racism, and poverty. They are brilliant when it comes to engaging young people and in crafting plans, together with LGBTQ2S young people, to improve the chances that those young people will exit homelessness.

However, programs are not enough.

Programs alone will never adequately address LGBTQ2S youth homelessness. Programs should be part of a comprehensive, coordinated system that works to prevent LGBTQ2S youth from becoming homeless, and if homelessness occurs, quickly moving them into housing with appropriate supports.

### COORDINATED, COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO ENDING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS



\*Throughout the provision of services, assessment will be ongoing. Source: Hunter, S. (2016)

The system must include focused responses for LGBTQ2S youth. Focused responses, including targeted prevention tactics, specialized housing programs and building the capacity of existing housing programs to serve LGBTQ2S youth in a safe and affirming manner, are crucial components in developing a strategy to meet the needs of LGBTQ2S youth and promote social inclusion and acceptance of all young people accessing services (Abramovich, 2016).

*That's when I feel homeless. Cuz they ain't no box for me. I'm Ahmed, ain't no box. And so that's when I felt homeless. When people will try to categorize me, felt they couldn't. So you're just some thing. Go somewhere. Because I don't want, I don't have the time to think beyond the shallow box and the shallow binary bullshit. I don't have time to think deeper.*

A, 23 years old

## **Now is the Time to Act**

Youth homelessness has been recognized as an issue warranting local, regional and national attention for decades. Likewise, the disproportionate rate of homelessness among LGBTQ2S youth has been common knowledge among advocates for youth experiencing homelessness and the LGBTQ2S community for over 20 years.

*When I think about home, I think about a place...a relaxation place. A place where you can't be judged. A place where everything is perfect, your own perfect domain. A place where you can just be yourself. A place where you're surrounded by love, you know what I'm saying...a place...home, oh my god, oh...I can't wait until I have a home.*

R, 21 years old

## **All Youth Deserve a Safe Home**

The newly released *Youth Rights! Right Now!* guide (2016) places the issue of youth homelessness in a human rights framework, asserting that all youth have a fundamental, legal right to be free of homelessness and to have access to adequate housing. Situating LGBTQ2S youth homelessness within a human rights framework is a promising strategy for recognizing this group of young people as deserving of equal rights and a life with dignity—both as LGBTQ2S people and as people experiencing homelessness. Solutions to LGBTQ2S youth homelessness must include identifying a strategy for addressing the systemic cissexism and heterosexism that further relegate LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness to the margins.

## **LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness Requires a Specialized Response**

If we are going to adequately respond to youth homelessness, we need targeted strategies for specific subpopulations that are disproportionately represented in the population of youth experiencing homelessness. Preventing, reducing and ending LGBTQ2S youth homelessness requires specialized responses and targeted strategies that carefully consider the unique and diverse needs of queer and trans youth. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work. LGBTQ2S youth must also be considered in the context of their membership in an oppressed and socially stigmatized group. The lives and experiences of LGBTQ2S people have historically been devalued through the passing of legislation relegating them to second-class citizenship. In fact, LGBTQ2S identities were criminalized and pathologized outright until relatively recently. Laws have not only explicitly restricted the rights of LGBTQ2S people; they have also systematically erased LGBTQ2S people through exclusionary practices.

Discrimination against LGBTQ2S people continues to be a sanctioned activity in American society. The U.S. does not currently have federal non-discrimination protections that are inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity; such protections vary state by state. At the time of writing, only 19 states and the District of Columbia prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression in public accommodations, employment and housing. In addition to the lack of federal non-discrimination protections, LGBTQ2S youth in the U.S. have recently been subjected to a barrage of state and local level challenges to the rights of queer and trans people in public accommodations, housing and employment. This is particularly true for transgender people. In Canada, a 1996 amendment to the Human Rights Act included sexual orientation as one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination. In 2016, the Federal Government announced legislation (Bill C-16) to enshrine the legal and human rights protection of transgender and gender diverse people across Canada. This means that, for the first time, the Canadian Human Rights Act will explicitly protect people from discrimination and hate crime on the basis of gender identity and gender expression. Governments can support the equitable treatment and inherent worth of all people by including sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression as protected classes in non-discrimination laws.

Understanding the societal oppression of LGBTQ2S people through the lenses of cissexism and heterosexism allows us to broaden the analysis of the harassment and discrimination faced by LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness from looking only

at the micro level of interpersonal interactions to include the macro level of institutional structures that produce and maintain this group's marginalization (Shelton, 2015). This understanding directs our attention to the ways our systems have failed LGBTQ2S youth, and calls us to redesign our systems to meet the needs of all youth.

### **LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness Requires a Strategically Developed Response That Focuses Less on Reacting to the Problem and More on Prevention and Long-Term Solutions**

In addition to a strategy to identify and address the systemic marginalization of LGBTQ2S young people, this approach would include policies and service systems that prioritize prevention and long-term solutions (i.e., adequate housing and support), supported by emergency services that bridge the gap (Gaetz, 2013). The goal of services should be preventing homelessness from occurring, but when it does occur, making it a rare, brief and one-time event.

A prevention plan should emphasize strategies for early intervention and place particular value on strengthening and reunifying families whenever it is safe and possible to do so. It is important to understand that family reunification for LGBTQ2S youth is not always possible. One strategy for expanding the possibilities of family reunification is to broaden the definition of family. Family reunification efforts should be open to including adults other than birth parents or guardians, to increase the chances of identifying at least one supportive family member. Additionally, LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness may create their own families as a way to care for themselves and each other. Created families function as kinship networks; they are constructed by LGBTQ2S youth to enable caretaking and mutual support, safety, and a sense of belonging. It has been noted that an LGBTQ2S person's created family is often viewed as a stronger source of support than their families of origin (Connolly, 2005; Cooper, 2009). These created families step in when the families of origin have failed—often providing consistency, care and support. Beyond meeting the presenting needs of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness, one of the most important things service providers can do is to ask LGBTQ2S youth about their chosen families, and listen to and respect the ways that LGBTQ2S youth construct family. These created families can be integral supports to a young person, increase their sense of wellbeing and be key allies in helping them remain connected to program supports (Lowrey, 2016).

## **Youth-Serving Systems Need a Standardized Model of Care for Working With LGBTQ2S Youth Experiencing Homelessness**

In order to design an effective systemic response to LGBTQ2S youth homelessness, youth-serving systems need a standardized model of care. Such a model will enable shelters and youth-serving organizations to provide an accepting, affirming and supportive environment for LGBTQ2S youth. A standardized model of care will also let LGBTQ2S youth know what to expect when entering services (e.g., questions that will be asked during intake, access to bathrooms, etc.).

*The intake was so shitty in terms of trans stuff. There's just no room for trans or even LGBTQ stuff on their intake. I tried to incorporate it in, 'cause they are like, 'do you need subway tokens to go to your appointments?' and I'm like 'yes! I'm going to this trans program Monday, this trans program Tuesday...' and they just kind of ignored that.*

J, 26 years old

A standardized model of care will help meet the needs of LGBTQ2S youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, and ensure that this population of young people is served more appropriately. Some components of a standardized model of care include: mandatory LGBTQ2S cultural competency training for all staff, inclusive intake forms that are consistent across programs and systems; close consideration of the physical environment of services (e.g., private and semi-private rooms with washrooms increase access by improving safety); non-discrimination policies, consistent across programs and systems, that are inclusive of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression; and specialized LGBTQ2S housing programs, which we know are absolutely necessary for some young people.

These recommendations emphasize the importance, in building solutions, of working across youth-serving systems, government and social support sectors, as well as engaging with the communities and young people affected most by these issues.

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## LGBTQ2S Youth Must be Included in Crafting Solutions to LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness

*As soon as you're seen as homeless, you're seen as someone who's not able to collaborate. Whose voice doesn't count. And that is absolutely regardless of any kind of background that you might've come from.*

J, 24 years old

LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness must be engaged in the creation of solutions to improve their lives and to address LGBTQ2S youth homelessness more broadly. It is up to the adults working with LGBTQ2S youth to be intentional, communicative and aware in forming partnerships with LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness (Pucci-Garcon, 2016). Talburt (2004) calls on adults to expand the possibilities of who LGBTQ2S youth are and who they can become, rather than relying solely on the knowledge cultivated *by* adults *about* LGBTQ2S youth. Ageism and adultism can make this a difficult task. Ageism and adultism occur when youth are presumed to know less than adults because they are younger, and adults are presumed to know more, simply because they are older.

In the U.S., the National Youth Forum on Homelessness (the Forum) is one example of authentic youth engagement that is inclusive of LGBTQ2S youth. Following a national conference in 2015, participating youth said they wanted a more robust, consistent presence in national conversations about youth homelessness. Co-hosted by the National Alliance to End Homelessness and the True Colors Fund, the Forum is creating youth-led change in the national movement to end youth homelessness. The Forum ensures that strategies to end youth homelessness are generated by youth and the national conversation is informed by and filtered through the perspectives of youth with lived experiences of homelessness.

Members of the Forum:

- Identify and analyze policies that impact youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness,
- Assess the effectiveness of current and proposed interventions to assist youth experiencing homelessness,
- Provide input to national organizations working to address youth homelessness,

- Advocate for strong policy and practice at the national, state, and local level, to support youth experiencing homelessness and to make their experiences of homelessness rare, brief and one-time.

Historically, youth experiencing homelessness may have been taken advantage of and tokenized in multiple ways. Youth are often asked to share their stories on panels, in the media or at fundraising events. Though well-intentioned, these opportunities are limiting, in that they often do not include young people's ideas about solutions, and may position young people as victims. Authentic youth engagement is about more than inviting youth to share their past experiences: it's also about providing an opportunity for them to share their vision for the future (Pucci-Garcon, 2016).

## **The Way We Talk About LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness Matters**

*You think we don't see what they put on their website about us? What they say about us? We do. We visit the website. We see what they really think about us. How do you think that makes us feel? Terrible. Just terrible.*

M, 22 years old

Without meaning to, advocates, researchers and organizations serving youth experiencing homelessness may perpetuate stigma in their public messages. We need to talk about LGBTQ2S youth homelessness through an intersectional and multi-dimensional lens. This means that our messaging does not solely portray risk and danger, but also potential and opportunity. It means that when we talk about family rejection, we must also talk about how certain laws, policies, and belief systems help parents think it is okay to reject their LGBTQ2S kids. We need to publicly ask for more than additional beds in homeless shelters; we must also ask for support in preventing LGBTQ2S young people from needing those beds in the first place. When we shift the message to include more holistic portrayals of LGBTQ2S youth and their experiences of homelessness, we open up the possibilities for their success in the following ways:

1. We demonstrate that we see them for all of who they are. We can hope this counters some of the stigma they face in their daily lives.

2. We recognize and are subsequently able to focus on their strengths and potential, rather than solely on the experiences that we assume make them victims.
3. Focusing on their strengths in public messaging can alter public perception and support. Shifting from a message of victimhood to a message of resilience has the potential to change how young people experience existing programs, the kinds of services and supports that are made available to young people, and how the public engages with both LGBTQ2S youth and all youth experiencing homelessness.

### **We Need Better Data to Help Us Talk About—and Act to Address— LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness**

Data play a key role in addressing social issues. We need data to better understand how to successfully prevent and intervene in LGBTQ2S youth homelessness. This includes ensuring LGBTQ2S representation in PiT counts and street needs assessments, evaluating the impact of programs and systems on the lives of LGBTQ2S youth, deepening our understanding of the prevalence, needs and barriers associated with homelessness for LGBTQ2S youth, and examining the ways in which LGBTQ2S youth move through various youth-serving systems, to determine which interventions are working. Researchers can take several actions to improve the available data about LGBTQ2S youth homelessness:

- Allow youth to self-identify their gender when participating in research. The Williams Institute recently released a guide for gender-related measures, including a two-step method for asking about an individual’s gender identity and their assigned sex at birth (2014).
- Include LGBTQ2S youth with lived experience and LGBTQ2S organizations in the collection of data, to help improve outreach to those who are not accessing services.
- Ask LGBTQ2S youth who have experienced homelessness what they think needs to change, and together with them, create a research project to address the issues most salient to them.
- Include holistic representations of LGBTQ2S youth in research, focusing on more than risk, but also illuminating their strengths, resilience and potential.
- Develop intervention research projects and cost-benefit analyses to further develop knowledge about what is working.
- Fill in current gaps in the research, including examining the experiences of rural LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness, and the experiences of racialized LGBTQ2S youth, who must navigate cissexism, heterosexism and racism in their daily lives.

## Limitations

While this book provides critical information for service providers, policy makers, students of social work and human services, and others interested in learning about LGBTQ2S youth homelessness, several limitations must be noted. First, despite our efforts, we were unable to include a case study on a program offering specialized services to Indigenous LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness. As a result of historical trauma, racism, discrimination and oppression, Indigenous people are overrepresented in the population of people experiencing homelessness. For those seeking to work with Indigenous LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness through an intersectional lens, highlighting such a program would have been of great service.

Additionally, this volume does not include research or programs specific to rural communities in Canada or the U.S. Rural communities tend to experience higher rates of poverty than urban communities, and therefore may have fewer resources to dedicate to serving youth experiencing homelessness, or to invest in training staff of youth-serving programs and systems to work with LGBTQ2S youth. The experiences of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness in rural areas cannot be easily mapped onto the experiences of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness in urban areas.

We did our best to include a range of voices and experiences in the chapters and case studies included in this book, and to incorporate the voices of young people with lived experiences of homelessness.

Although it has taken many years to convince key decision makers to take action, we have witnessed innovative practice and policy changes. LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness are being seen and heard as never before. Though progress is occurring, there is still much work to be done. Let us continue this work together, in our local communities, within our regions, and across our countries. We can effectively prevent and end LGBTQ2S youth homelessness globally.

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