

Communicating Findings – Unique Experiences of LGBTQ+ Adolescent Homelessness

Introduction

Within the United States' homeless population is a commonly-overlooked subsection of a subsection – LGBTQ+ adolescents. Queer-identifying people who were already struggling with social oppression are only faced with intense systemic oppression as they enter the country's homelessness systems. Individuals under the age of 24 make up approximately 33%, or one-third, of the homeless population across the country. Within this population, an estimated 20-40% of them identify as LGBTQ+ (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016). Overall across the entire United States, estimates suggest that only 7% of people identify as LGBTQ+; therefore, it seems as if this community is experiencing disproportionately high rates of homelessness. Additionally, the unique challenges faced by this community often result in critical gaps within HMIS data and ineffective efforts from service providers. These issues necessitate the implementation of queer-inclusive strategies such as programs/policies, care frameworks, and data collection methods. To fully understand the lived experiences of homeless and runaway LGBTQ+ adolescents, studies stress the necessity of systemically implementing full-scope improvements across homelessness services nationwide. In the United States, homeless LGBTQ+ youth are a particularly vulnerable and misunderstood population who deserve safety through queer-friendly services, programs, and environments; comprehensive care for their complex psychological struggles; and highly targeted interventions.

Hostile vs. Queer-Friendly Environments

Homelessness datasets from the Fredericksburg CoC provide a clear display of the systemic erasure of LGBTQ+ identities within modern services and practices. Demographic information is not comprehensive, and it leaves out information regarding clients' race, specific age, and sexuality. While clients' gender information is recorded, the clients' options for

selecting a gender are confusing: man, woman, transgender, and nonbinary. This conflates the concept of personal gender identity to the state of being a transgender person, which shows a profound disconnect from – and lack of understanding of – the transgender experience. In general, even the service providers for RHY (runaway homeless youth) are shown to be ill-equipped to care for LGBTQ+ clientele due to consistently disregarding the importance of gender-affirming care, removing pride flags, having minimal advocacy efforts, and so forth (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016). Queer individuals can only receive adequate service provision if the staff around them understands and respects their unique needs and struggles. Cultural competency training for employees could improve their ability to provide tailored, productive, and identity-conscious services (Cochran et al., 2002). Fundamentally, the presence of comprehensive demographic data would allow service providers to have an accurate perception of the homeless LGBTQ+ adolescents who are in critical need of care.

Unique Mental Health Challenges

The lack of precise demographic information about homeless LGBTQ+ adolescents causes service providers to be ill-equipped with creating affirmative environments as a whole. Unsurprisingly, the nation-wide perpetuation of systemic marginalization and identity erasure causes a hostile environment for queer people, causing many adolescents to suffer from intense mental health struggles and high rates of homelessness (Whitbeck et al., 2004). The Fredericksburg CoC project didn't quite delve into statistics on its homeless population's mental health struggles – let alone LGBTQ+ adolescents' mental health struggles – however, many researchers have found easily-identifiable trends across the country. A 2011 study from Rosario et al. concluded that the overall lack of support for LGBTQ+ individuals is thought to cause the community's heightened rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse issues. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ adolescents disproportionally lack supportive adults in their lives while simultaneously facing social ostracization from their peers. The individuals who become homeless are met with particularly high rates of risk-taking behaviors, criminal behavior, shoplifting, survival sex strategies, drug use, and so forth.

Targeted (Intersectional) Interventions

With respect to the specific and unique challenges faced by the homeless and adolescent LGBTQ+ community, an evidently effective approach to the issue would be targeted intervention strategies. From the small-scale Fredericksburg project to nation-wide research, it is evident that homelessness is not a universal one-size-fits-all experience. While clients should never feel defined by their identity, an identity-affirming lens would naturally create environments and services that provide adequate comfort and validation. It's crucial that every employee who works with the homeless population has a deep comprehension of intersectionality, heteronormativity, and transphobia; this is a fundamental requirement for providing care and services that are authentically beneficial. Furthermore, this is also applicable for schoolteachers, counselors, and police officers who often antagonize LGBTQ+ adolescents. A largely overlooked struggle that these individuals face is a fear of police: many individuals have dealt with outwardly homophobic and transphobic cops, many officers have openly admitted to not understanding LGBTQ+ individuals (nor knowing how to talk to them), and many feared police officers' ability to send them back home to an abusive home where they weren't accepted (McCandless, 2017). This further exemplifies the need for these individuals to receive highly-tailored compassion and care.

Conclusion

These specific studies are far-removed from the group project for the Fredericksburg CoC, which only verifies exactly why it's crucial for the CoC to affirm LGBTQ+ individuals within their system. The administrative data team found and discussed the issue of the CoC not having appropriate LGBTQ+ status in their demographic data, however this trend is actually prevalent up to the national-scale HUD data in the official 2023 Annual Homeless Assessment Report. Thus, a major finding is not necessarily for the Fredericksburg CoC to implement intersectionality into their data collection, but rather for each CoC across the country to do so as a whole.

Overall, the community of homeless LGBTQ+ adolescents is poorly understood, which appears to be due to extreme social rejection, police oppression, poor support networks, high

rates of family instability, and volatile mental health challenges. These compounded psychological consequences are unique to heavily-marginalized groups. Large-scale advocacy and societal acceptance are critically important to the survival of this vulnerable population. Although systemic injustice is impossible to fix overnight, overhauling the commonly-oppressive practices of homeless service providers could greatly push society in the correct direction.

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