

Family rejection is leading cause of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness in York Region: study

Family rejection is the leading cause of homelessness among LGBTQ2S youth in York Region, according to a first-of-its-kind study released last week.

Understanding LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness In York Region is a study led by Dr. Alex Abramovich of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), aimed at examining the specific needs and experiences faced by young members of the local LGBTQ2S community experiencing homelessness with a goal to help develop policies, programs and practices that address their unique needs.

The study was carried out between December 2018 and October 2019 and brought together input from 42 participants across York Region, including 33 youth at-risk of or currently experiencing homelessness.

Every young person's pathway into homelessness is unique, complex and often caused by numerous factors, found the report. The major pathway into homelessness identified by youth participants was family conflict, which included LGBTQ2S identity-based family rejection. Youth reported a variety of reasons for family conflict, including abuse, mental health issues, and alcohol and substance abuse problems. Additionally, over half of the youth interviewed reported previous involvement with child protection services.

According to the study, the average age at which participants first left home was the age of 18, although nearly 30 per cent of participants reported leaving home at or below the age of 16.

A 13-year-old was couch surfing they weren't in a shelter, but they were sleeping on friends' couches, says Dr. Abramovich. This is a common experience in York Region, which makes [the issue of LGBTQ2S homelessness] much more hidden. Young people have violence, abuse and conflict happening in their households, they can't live at home but they don't want to go to a shelter because they don't feel safe or stigmatized. When they end up couch surfing it creates a real invisibility.

As he carried out the study, Dr. Abramovich says he was surprised at how challenging it was to recruit participants. When he and his team conduct studies like this, they work with community services to reach youth and give youth the opportunity to meet the team before they have an option of signing up to share their stories.

Here, our criteria was quite specific, he explains. Young people had to have been homeless or at risk of homelessness in York Region, we had a specific age range, they had to identify as LGBTQ2S, we went to all the services and we found nobody was signing up. It was really tough for

youth to come forward and be willing to speak with us. We knew they were there but they just didn't feel safe or comfortable for whatever reason.

?It became pretty obvious to us very quickly there were issues around LGBTQ2S identity disclosure and non-disclosure. They just didn't feel safe coming out is another way of saying it. Many of the youth were going to services but they didn't come out as LGBTQ, so staff didn't know, they felt protective and they felt afraid in many cases. I even had a young person follow me out of the service and didn't want anyone to know they were speaking with me. They really didn't want anyone to see that happen and it was clear to me there were a lot of issues around stigma.?

Working with 360 Kids, a major partner of the study, the team was eventually able to reach a good number of LGBTQ youth from the Region and the stories they shared were both powerful and harrowing.

One 16-year-old participant said when they came out, their mother's response was to say, ?I made her sick to her stomach and that she wants to throw up because of me, and I put her under so much stress she wants to kill herself because of me. It was heartbreaking and I didn't feel safe at home.?

A 19-year-old participant said they too didn't feel safe living at home with an ?LGBT-phobic? father.

?He doesn't agree with it, he thinks LGBT people are like, perverts or disgusting or mentally ill, or that it is not real, or it's a choice. And my mom seemed to be ? she put on this mask that she was supportive, but when I came out as a trans man, she basically just said, ?That's not real, that's not true, that's not who you are,' and ?I don't agree with it. I don't agree with you medically transitioning.' She kept?manipulating me and kind of gaslighting me into believing that I'm not trans. I can't be in this type of environment. I have to leave.?

These stories were ?heartbreaking,? said Dr. Abramovich and they stayed with him throughout the course of the study.

?I think about many of these young people and really hope [this study] will implement change,? he said. I feel it is really important for parents and families to understand just how much these issues impact young people and how severe these issues are. Parents should read this report and take some time to reflect and understand how harmful those words are.?

In order to better address the issues facing LGBTQ youth in York Region, the study makes a number of key recommendations.

Topping the list is forming a standardized model of service delivery across York Region that is LGBTQ2S inclusive. All housing programs and support services, they say, should emphasize inclusion with a standard intake process, questions regarding chosen names, pronouns, and gender identity on intake forms, ensuring services all-gender washrooms.

Population-based housing options for LGBTQ2S youth should also be made available in ways ?that are not segregated by the gender binary,

including emergency shelter beds, transitional housing and supportive housing programs.?

LGBTQ2S-inclusive drop-in programs should be supported to provide a place for youth to meet and support one another while enjoying mentorship and life-skill-building opportunities and cultural programs; existing services should expand outreach; and youth-serving agencies should subsidize travel costs for youth seeking them out.

?It is recommended that youth-serving agencies develop programs that emphasize prevention and early intervention,? they conclude. ?Family reconnection should be initiated with supportive family members when appropriate. Family reconnection programs should promote awareness and LGBTQ2S inclusion by providing families with the tools and resources necessary to support youth when they come out. Additionally, it is recommended that organizations work with schools and GSAs to support LGBTQ2S youth.?

Now that the study is done, the next step is making sure the study brings about results.

?This took a long time and a lot of resources; now we have the answers, the list of solutions and recommendations, so what happens now?? said Dr. Abramovich. ?Change happens by working closely with community, working closely with key stakeholders, with government. There are so many different levels of stakeholders who have to be involved in this process. It is not just working with one or two services, it is working across the Region with multiple services and working with government to implement these changes.?

To read the full study, visit www.homelesshub.ca/resource/understanding-lgbtq2s-youth-homelessness-york-region.

By Brock Weir