



University of Brighton

Out On My Own: Understanding the Experiences and Needs of Homeless Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth

Executive Summary

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FOREWORD

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Overview of the study

The research project investigated the needs and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) homeless youth in Brighton and Hove. This was done through interviews and questionnaires with 44 LGBT youth who were homeless or had been homeless in the past and through interviews with 21 local service providers. The report makes recommendations about how local services can be improved for LGBT homeless youth and how homelessness in this population could be prevented; in particular it identifies how the provision of specialist accommodation for homeless LGBT youth would prevent further homelessness and improve their health.

1.2 How the study was conducted

- In-depth interviews were conducted with 33 LGBT youth and questionnaires were conducted with another 11 LGBT youth, leading to a sample of 44 young people aged 16-25.
 - Of these young people, 23 were young men, 17 were young women and four identified as transgender (all male to female).
 - In terms of sexual identity 18 identified as gay men; 15 identified as lesbian or gay women; 10 identified as bisexual and one of the transgender women identified as heterosexual.
 - Eight of the young people (18%) were from Black and Minority Ethnic groups.
 - A third of the young people had spent their childhood in Brighton and Hove and the remaining two thirds had migrated to the area. Most of the in-migration was due to the reputation of Brighton and Hove as a safe place for LGBT people to live.
 - Two thirds of the young people we interviewed were 'not in employment, education or training' (NEET).
 - A quarter had been in the care of the local authority.
- Most of the young people who participated in the study were recruited through a youth advice centre's housing advice drop-in, where monitoring of sexual identity and transgender identity was taking place. Young people were also recruited through street outreach and the sample thus included homeless youth who were disengaged from services.
- The types of homelessness experienced included "sofa-surfing", living in squats and rough sleeping and it included those living in temporary accommodation and supported housing. Nearly half of the young people in our study were sleeping rough or had done so in the past.
- Service providers were also interviewed, or took part in a focus group, to investigate their levels of awareness and possible training needs, in

relation to meeting the needs of LGBT homeless youth. Eleven people took part in the focus group and a further nine were interviewed including frontline workers and service managers.

1.3 Causes of homelessness in LGBT youth

- The sexual identity, or transgender identity, of a young person was implicated directly or indirectly in the initial cause of homelessness in most cases. Some young people were evicted from the family home, or chose to leave, because their parents were intolerant of the young person's sexual identity; others chose to leave because they presumed their parents would have a negative reaction if they did know about the young person's sexual identity.
- Although homeless LGBT youth share many of the characteristics of homeless youth in general, in that they tend to come from disrupted families and are more likely to have been in care, there was evidence that LGBT youth were more vulnerable to abuse within the home.
- As well as violence and abuse within the home, some young people identified that homophobic bullying and assaults at school and in the neighbourhood contributed to their decision to leave home. Two of the young transgender people also identified that abuse within the home and neighbourhood contributed to their initial episode of homelessness.
- Some young people chose to leave home because they felt isolated in the place where they lived and wanted to live in a place where LGBT lives were more visible.
- Sexual identity and transgender identity were also implicated in young people's subsequent episodes of homelessness. Homophobia from other tenants or residents in rented accommodation and in supported housing contributed to further episodes of homelessness.
- Some young people also became homeless when fleeing from domestic violence in same-sex relationships.

1.4 LGBT youths' experiences of housing and homelessness services

- Homeless LGBT youth reported negative experiences of local authority homelessness applications and it appeared that their vulnerability and hence their priority need for housing was not always recognised. This was often the case for young people without a local connection.
- Homeless LGBT youth reported feeling unsafe in existing temporary and supported accommodation. There were some incidences of homophobic harassment from other residents and lack of appropriate intervention by staff.

- A number of the homeless LGBT young people felt safer sleeping rough and had gone on to develop a pattern of long term transient homelessness.
- Young LGBT people reported feeling isolated and unsupported within existing services; most felt that specific housing provision with a critical mass of LGBT residents and specialist workers would help to overcome this isolation.
- Most of the young LGBT people were in favour of services monitoring sexual and gender identity, if it was done sensitively.

1.5 The health and well-being of homeless LGBT youth

Homeless LGBT youth were particularly vulnerable in relation to their mental and sexual health.

- 67% reported they had been bullied at school and this appeared to be linked to truanting and exclusion from school.
- Where young LGBT people had been bullied and they had tranted and/or were excluded from school, this was linked to educational under-achievement.
- None of the young people had received sex or relationship education at school which was inclusive of LGBT lives.
- 26% of the participants had been physically abused as children and 30% had been sexually abused or sexually assaulted.
- Abuse at home and bullying in schools is linked to homelessness in LGBT youth.
- Nearly all the young people in our study reported a history of mental health problems or substance misuse. Over two thirds had a history of attempting suicide and half reported alcohol or substance misuse.
- Furthermore, 21% of the young people were, or had been, in abusive relationships with partners.
- Some of the young people in our study were vulnerable to exploitative sexual relationships which were linked to their homelessness: 40% reported that they had had unprotected sex and 20% reported that they had sold or exchanged sex.

1.6 The need for specialist accommodation for homeless LGBT youth

- Local services have sound policies in place designed to prevent or deal with homophobic harassment, and attempts were made to make existing services safe and accessible. However, these were not always effective and existing services were not always safe for LGBT youth.
- Homeless LGBT youth felt that they would benefit from specialist accommodation which was exclusively for LGBT youth with identifiable LGBT staff; they felt this would help them to overcome the effects of homophobia and isolation that they had experienced when growing up and which they had also subsequently experienced in supported accommodation.
- Specialist provision for homeless LGBT youth would help them to develop skills and support networks which could alleviate the effects of their earlier experiences of abuse and homophobia in schools and within their families. This could potentially play an important role in the prevention of further episodes of homelessness, reduce their vulnerability in relation to their sexual and mental health and prevent long term patterns of homelessness.
- Service providers recognised that it was difficult to provide the kind of support isolated LGBT youth needed within existing services, although specialist LGBT workers could help to alleviate isolation.

1.7 Recommendations

- There is a need for local LGBT only supported accommodation and specialist support workers.
- There is a need to make existing housing and homelessness services safer for LGBT youth.
- There is a need to improve the assessment of LGBT youth making homelessness applications to the local authority in order to identify vulnerability and priority need.
- There is a need to develop the monitoring and assessment of sexual identity and transgender identity in other services, including social services and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, in order to identify needs and provide appropriate support.
- Earlier preventative work in schools, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, social services and youth services should be developed to reduce the incidence of homelessness in this group. This could be achieved through:

- The provision of LGBT specific supported lodgings
 - Adult and peer mentoring
 - Family mediation
 - Referrals to appropriate support groups
 - Challenging homophobia in schools and delivering inclusive sex and relationship education
 - Providing a structure so that LGBT youth can access support through schools, and widening access to LGBT youth support within the Youth Support Service
 - Providing specific educational support for LGBT youth who truant or are excluded from school
 - Management and frontline staff undertaking LGBT, homophobia and heterosexism awareness training
- Further support needs to be given to LGBT youth who have under-achieved at school and college because of homophobia and lack of support. The age restriction on the Connexions service should be extended beyond 19 years, to educationally disadvantaged, vulnerable LGBT youth who are NEET, until such time as primary and secondary schools are able to provide a safe and inclusive environment.