



Porchlight

Changing attitudes • Changing lives



Flying the flag: Making a difference to homeless LGBTQ youth

By Carin Tunåker

In collaboration with the School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent



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Foreword

Given the many structural reasons why someone becomes homeless – for example, poverty, relationship breakdown or loss of employment – it is possible to predict numbers, demographic and geographical areas where this is more likely to happen.

However, predicting who will become homeless, simply because of who they are, is impossible. The issues faced by many young LGBTQ people, even in today's society, are widely documented but less well understood are the reasons why a significant proportion of this group ends up becoming homeless.

I have heard local authorities say countless times that because a homeless young person has 'left' home, they cannot rely on the state to pick them up and safely house them. Understandable and possibly reasonable in some cases, but not when someone has been forced out of their home because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

I hope that this report will raise awareness and lead to a greater understanding of the challenges facing our young LGBTQ people. I'd like to see it start a dialogue within the homeless sector, and beyond, so that we can start to treat our young people with dignity and understanding, giving them the freedom and confidence to reach their full potential and lead happy and meaningful lives.

Mike Barrett, CEO, Porchlight

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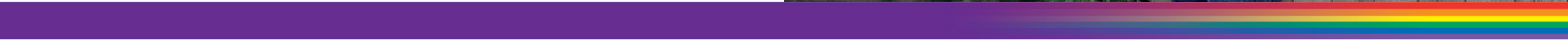
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Introduction

Homelessness as a result of sexual orientation or gender identity – whether fully, partially, directly or indirectly – is a fairly under researched phenomena. The reason for this is that this highly marginalised group is hidden and invisible from the public eye, and not often discussed by housing providers, the media or in academic works. Nevertheless, it is an important issue and a serious concern that organisations that work in housing and homelessness prevention, and the general public, ought to be aware of. Research has shown that as many as 30% of homeless youth in the UK are LGBTQ.¹

This report is the result of a year-long research project conducted by Carin Tunåker, together with Porchlight and the School of Anthropology and Conservation at the University of Kent. The research is part of a PhD in social anthropology and it is hoped that it will illuminate current issues and raise awareness of the difficulties faced by homeless LGBTQ youth. It also aims to facilitate knowledge transfer and share best practices between organisations that work in the homeless sector generally, and in LGBTQ youth work specifically.

The report will give a summary of the research and its aims, give a brief overview of the outcomes, and provide recommendations for future work with homeless LGBTQ youth.



Steve - 19

Steve has been sofa surfing, staying in supported accommodation and shelters since he was 15. “I left my dad’s because I had come out as gay when I was 15. This led to lots of arguments; he basically hated it. He’s not directly homophobic, but my older brother is gay as well and I think it was just too much for him, like he thought it would damage the family name or something.”

Steve found support through local LGBTQ groups and now works with young people that have just come out, providing support and sharing his story. When Steve came out, he found himself victimised time and time again. “Me and my boyfriend were walking down the high street and we had people shouting abuse, throwing stuff, lots of people saying that we were disgusting and that they hoped we would die of AIDS... things like that.”

For Steve, having access to specialised support was vital. “If a young person thinks that they might be [LGBT] then they should be able to sit down and talk about it, have someone tell them that it’s ok to come out, and it’s ok to wait as well. Tell them that they should come out only when they feel comfortable to do so.”



Research has shown that as many as 30% of homeless youth in the UK are LGBTQ.

Glossary

- **Bisexual** – a person that is attracted to both men and women.
 - **Gay** – a man that is attracted to men.
 - **Gender** – refers to the way one’s sex is expressed.
 - **Gender identity** – this is separate from a person’s sexual orientation, and refers only to what gender the person chooses to identify as.
 - **Heteronormative** – refers to a belief that heterosexuality is the norm and preferred sexual orientation.
 - **Heterosexual** – also commonly referred to as ‘straight’, refers to people who are attracted to the opposite sex.
 - **Homophobia** – discrimination and irrational fear or prejudice towards LGB people or someone perceived to be in that group, as well as towards friends and family of LGB people.
 - **Lesbian** – a woman that is attracted to women.
 - **LGBT** – An acronym used to describe those that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender. Lesbian, gay and bisexual refer to sexual orientation, whereas transgender refers to gender identity. There are often various letters added to this acronym: for example ‘Q’ for questioning, ‘I’ for intersex, or ‘U’ for unsure.
- It is also common to use LGBT+ which aims to include everyone without having to add all of the letters.
- **Queer** – a term with derogatory origins that some LGBT communities have reclaimed as an umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities. Some may still find this term offensive.
 - **Questioning** – a term often added to the LGBT acronym (LGBTQ), which refers to a person that is unsure about or questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.
 - **Sex** – refers to a person’s biological sex.
 - **Sexual orientation** – a person’s preference with regard to which sex they are attracted to.
 - **Sexuality** – refers to a whole range of feelings, desires and actions related to the act of sex.²
 - **Transphobia** – discrimination and irrational fear or prejudice towards transgender people or someone perceived to be in that group, as well as towards friends and family of transgender people.
 - **Transsexual** – a person who wants to or already has changed their sex from the one they were born with. You do not have to be transsexual to be transgender.

Please note that many find the word homosexual offensive. The use of LGB is recommended when speaking about sexual orientation.

Summary of research

Background

One of the main motivations for conducting this research was a perceived sharp increase in LGBTQ service users within Porchlight's accommodation projects.

At a headcount in June 2011, staff noted that 32% of the residents in Porchlight's young persons' services identified as LGBTQ, which is an over-representation in light of the national average (according to ONS) that places individuals identifying as LGB at approximately 1.4%.³

The figures collected through quantitative measures, such as the Porchlight database and a questionnaire regarding sexual orientation, showed a very different picture – hardly any of the service users wanted to officially disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. The actual number of LGBTQ service users could only be established by support workers who had worked closely with the young people for some time, and with whom they felt safe enough to discuss their sexual preferences.⁴

It was therefore noted that in order for Porchlight to have a reliable and realistic estimate of LGBTQ service users in the organisation, a qualitative means of investigation was necessary. By using anthropological methods, we would be able to attain a more in-depth understanding of what we were doing right or wrong when supporting people whose lack of appropriate housing was directly or indirectly related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Although, inevitably, there are LGBTQ people of all ages that experience homelessness, it was decided that this research would focus on homeless youth (ages 16-25), as it was in the young persons' services that the concern arose. Nonetheless, the research has taken into account views and opinions of people of all ages, and the recommendations and outcomes of the research may, to some extent, apply to older age groups. Older groups of LGBTQ people may experience significant issues with regards to housing and homelessness which we must also be aware of and consider in terms of our provision.

Aims

The aim of this research is to attain an intrinsic understanding of the experiences of homeless LGBTQ youth. Some of the key questions this research asks are:

- If there are a significant amount of LGBTQ individuals accessing our services, does their sexual orientation or gender identity contribute towards their homelessness?
- What are the reasons for LGBTQ youth homelessness?
- What are the personal experiences of homeless LGBTQ youth?
- How can our services improve in terms of support for LGBTQ individuals?
- Is there a way that preventative measures can be put into place to help avoid LGBTQ youth homelessness?
- What is the availability of support in the area, and are there area specific concerns for LGBTQ youth?



Methodology

This project was conducted using social anthropological research methods. Social anthropology is an academic discipline that focuses largely on qualitative research. It is thought that by 'being there'⁵ and spending time with a community or group of people for an extended period of time, the researcher will gain a more thorough understanding of the group being studied.

The anthropologist spends a year or more living with and/or spending time with her/his informants, whilst conducting informal, semi-structured or structured interviews, or simply taking part in everyday activities; this is a method known as participant observation.⁶

For this research project, this approach was imperative to the success of gathering information about the sensitive, and even taboo, subject of sexual orientation and gender identity. Talking to a young person about their sexual preferences can be difficult and sometimes uncomfortable. Coming out as LGB or T to your friends, peers, family or other adults in your life is challenging to say the least, and not something that should be taken lightly. Therefore it is unlikely that a young person that has not yet come to terms with their sexuality will openly reveal their sexual or gender identity through means of quantitative monitoring; this could be questionnaires, helpline calls, interviews for accommodation, visits to health care practitioners, etc.

To reveal sexual identity in such a situation would be the equivalent of 'coming out' and making it official. If a person is not yet comfortable with his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, it makes it difficult to be put on the spot by someone they have never met before. Spending time with, and getting to know young people that live or have lived in Porchlight's young persons' services, made it possible to foster relationships and gain people's trust, which enabled us to get a holistic view of the concerns these young people face in their everyday lives.

This project also used visual anthropological methods, namely photo and video elicitation.⁷ Getting young people involved in photo and video projects encouraged them to open up, and think and talk to each other about their situations and about homelessness. By actively taking part in an activity that produced visible results, they had the opportunity to have their own say in how they would like to be portrayed to the outside world.

Working with vulnerable young people carries the responsibility of a certain set of ethical considerations. This research summary contains personal stories from young people that have generously consented to their stories being shared publically, however names, locations and certain personal details have been altered in order to assure anonymity. All of the data gathered for this research project is kept by Porchlight within the charity's own guidelines for best practice with regard to personal information.⁸

The reasons young LGBTQ people become homeless are far from straightforward.

Locations and respondents

All of the research has taken place in south east England, with a majority focus on Kent where the young persons' projects and the research was carried out. For this research project, more than 50 interviews were carried out with young people, Porchlight staff, other agencies and members of the public, and participant observation was carried out in five young persons' projects across Kent for a period of one year.

Whilst interviews provided a good source of knowledge, the most important part of the research has been participant observation; actually spending time with the young people in the projects and listening to their daily concerns and struggles. Conducting an interview with a young person can sometimes be challenging, and may not yield straightforward answers on this very sensitive topic. The most useful approach was to have quiet one-to-one conversations, having fostered good relationships with the young people that reside in the projects. Fieldwork was also carried out in Kent and involved visiting and taking part in local events regarding homelessness and LGBTQ concerns, as well as other charities and agencies working in these areas.



Molly - 19

When Molly came home one day, she was met with all of her belongings packed up by the door. Her mum has had enough, and decided it was time for her to go. She was 17 at the time. "The reason I became homeless was really because of a mix of things, and being a lesbian was just one of them. My mum never liked it and she always used to bring it up when we had fights."

Molly came out at the age of 13, and she felt that it was always a catalyst for arguments in the family. Her younger brother was a great support, but her mum couldn't cope with it. Molly and her brother also suffered from domestic violence in the family home, and had a generally unstable upbringing.

After Molly left home she was housed in a B&B by Social Services, but the landlord was homophobic and looked for any excuse to get rid of her. "She clearly didn't like the 'gay thing', and she was uncomfortable with me having posters of girls in my room, she told me it was disgusting". Molly was asked to leave, and heard from a friend that Porchlight were 'gay friendly' and applied for accommodation. She stayed in Porchlight accommodation for two years, and now lives in private rented accommodation with her girlfriend and has a stable job.

Outcomes/findings

Reasons for LGBTQ homelessness

The reasons young LGBTQ people become homeless are far from straightforward. Every person's story is different, and there can be many contributing factors to anyone's path into homelessness. A person's sexual orientation or gender identity can be one of those contributing factors. This research shows that coming out to your parents or guardians/carers as LGBT or Q can cause arguments in the family home and lead to the young person being asked to leave.⁹ However, in most situations it is far more complex than this.



As mentioned, revealing doubts about one's sexuality or gender to either family members, friends, or frankly to anyone at all, can be very daunting. It is difficult to predict how people will react, and it is likely to cause tension even in the most open-minded families.¹⁰ Because of this, many young people decide not to come out until they have left home and feel like they are in a safe space to do so.

Not being open about who you are to the people that matter the most leads to low confidence, poor self-esteem, self-doubt and – potentially – mental health issues that can manifest in various different ways, including self-harm or suicidal thoughts.¹¹ In turn, this affects daily life at home and can lead to conflicts, eventually resulting in homelessness. Often there are other reasons for issues within the home, such as a stepparent joining the household, domestic violence, neglect, mental health issues, and so on.

Furthermore, a young person who has been asked to leave home may not attribute the entire situation to their sexual orientation, and therefore not consider this factor when answering questions for monitoring. Especially in situations where there have been other reasons for having been asked to leave, intrinsically linked but not always obvious. It is also common for a young person to flee their home because they could not face coming out at home for fear of negative outcomes.

Many young people decide not to come out until they have left home and feel like they are in a safe space to do so.

Another factor that contributes towards the high number of LGBTQ youth in homelessness projects is that people are coming out at an earlier age; some as young as aged 12 start questioning and considering their sexuality.¹²

A recent article in *The Rolling Stone* mentioned that '[...] as societal advancements have made being gay less stigmatized and gay people more visible – and as the internet now allows kids to reach beyond their circumscribed social groups for acceptance and support – the average coming-out age has dropped from post-college age in the 1990s to around 16 today, which means that more and more kids are coming out while they're still economically reliant on their families'.¹³

There is a higher presence of LGBT people in the mainstream media, particularly since the recent same-sex marriage bill has passed, and many people perceive that being gay or trans is no longer 'such a big deal' and therefore coming out shouldn't have to be so hard. With the comfort of this perceived general, more open, public attitude, many young people decide to explore their sexual identity in their teens.

The majority of those that identify as LGBT in Porchlight's young persons' projects are actually still questioning their sexual or gender identity. Being young is a time for exploration and individuals often question everything about their environment and themselves, including their sexuality. They are also likely to be easily influenced by peers, by the media, and by adult role models in their own surroundings.

The instances of young people stating that they were bisexual in our young persons' hostels, for lack of a better category option upon being surveyed, were substantial. When asked about their sexual identity, many stated that; "if I had to choose, I'd say bisexual."

This, in turn, caused the reported number of bisexual young people to seem disproportionately high, particularly among girls who felt open-minded about their sexual orientation and willing to experiment. The vast majority had never heard of the term 'questioning' but once it was explained, agreed that it suited them better.

By explaining to young people during project monitoring that there is a survey option that reflects them being 'unsure' or 'questioning' with regard to their sexual or gender identity, Porchlight has been able to flag a significantly higher number of young LGBTQ people in our services. As youth that are questioning their sexual or gender identity may be in need of extra support, it is important that we monitor this so that the correct numbers can be flagged for providers.

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Amanda - 19

Amanda came out to her mum when she was 15. It wasn't really a problem, her mum was fine with it, but the problems started when she came out at school and got excluded by her previous friends, since she was the only lesbian in school at the time. "It was just really difficult to be without others, without having any support from anyone. I think what you really need is that stability of being with other gay people."

She fell into a bad crowd outside of school and started behaving antisocially to fit in with them. "My mum kicked me out, because I was just acting like a little brat." She never attributed her homelessness to coming out, but when she reflected on it she realised that it was all connected.

Amanda stayed with Porchlight for over a year, and now lives in university accommodation. "I think confidential support is really important. And even seeing posters that say 'LGBT group available' helps, because then you know instantly that it's fine, you can be who you are there and it makes you feel at ease. To see the letters 'LGBT' written somewhere makes you know that it's safe."

"My dad used to say things like 'those jeans are so gay', and my brother used to say that he thought gay people should be killed."

Many young people are not happy to categorise themselves at all and conveyed that they should not have to label themselves. One of the young people interviewed stated: "Why should I have to 'come out'? As if I'm telling them people I'm not normal. I shouldn't need to do that. In fact, I wish I had just come home one day with my girlfriend, as if it wasn't a big deal. Because it shouldn't be."

We also need to consider how such attitudes towards sexuality and gender surveillance impacts monitoring; if young people are not keen to label themselves, it is unlikely that they will choose a category on monitoring forms, and rather tick the box that they feel they are expected to choose.¹⁴

Service provision

When it comes to specialist housing for homeless LGBTQ youth, the provisions are scarce. Housing providers specialising in this area are, for example, Stonewall Housing and Albert Kennedy Trust, both located in London/south east England, but more support of this kind is certainly needed.

For this reason it is even more important for other housing and homelessness providers to ensure that they are open about their support for LGBTQ service users, even if they do not provide specialised services. Many LGBTQ people have faced discrimination from housing providers, whether private or housing associations, and may feel apprehensive about approaching others for fear of stigmatisation and further negative experiences.

Support and advice

- **Albert Kennedy Trust** – housing advice and support for homeless LGBTQ youth.
- **Bi.org** – lists different support networks for bisexual people.
- **Stonewall Housing** – specialist support for homeless LGBTQ people, based in London.
- **LGBT Jigsaw** – a combined website, comprised of several housing and LGBT support agencies, aimed at providing information for young homeless LGBT people.
- **LLGS** (London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard) – confidential advice, support and information for LGBT people across the UK.
- **Mermaids** – family and individual support for young people with gender identity issues
- **Stonewall UK** – general advice and lobbying for LGB rights.
- **Youth Chances** – a national research project, ongoing at the time of this research, aimed at young LGBTQ people.
- **PACE** – specialist support for LGBT mental health.
- **Galop** – London-based anti-violence and abuse charity.

Transgender concerns

The number of transgender service users during this research project was very low. This is not surprising given that transgendered individuals comprise a smaller and more marginalised group. Being transgender is even more stigmatised and taboo than sexual identity minorities, which makes them highly vulnerable (See Thornhill 2011).

Coming out as having feelings of gender dysphoria usually happens at an older age as a result of low societal acceptance and high levels of abuse and bullying, however, young people can start questioning their gender identity at an early age and this too is increasingly occurring. This means that being open to the possibility of a person not identifying as the same sex (and ensuing gender roles) they were biologically born into, is highly important.

In housing and homelessness provision, it is imperative that transgender service users are able to express their gender and that they are taken seriously as a trans man or trans woman. For example, if a homeless shelter is divided into separate male and female sections, a trans woman should have the right to live with other women, regardless of whether she has changed her physical sex. For instance, a trans woman residing in an exclusively male hostel is at high risk of physical and emotional abuse, and is likely to suffer mental health issues as a result. Likewise, it is important that monitoring is taken seriously for transgendered individuals.

Staff at various homeless and housing providers during this research have disclosed that they feel uncomfortable asking the question of whether a person is transgender or not, especially as they felt that it was often 'obvious' that a person was not. This is a problem because it is erroneous to assume that one can judge whether someone is transgender based on an individual's visible appearance. Furthermore, if the question is omitted or if it is asked uncomfortably, the trans person answering the question will most likely not disclose themselves as trans, thus feeling further stigmatised and demeaned.

“Some friends knew, but my family didn't know. I felt like I was living two different lives.”



Chloe - 20

At age 15 Chloe left home because her mum was an alcoholic and abused her. She spent years living with friends and relatives and being in and out of hospital with mental health issues. She didn't dare to come out to anyone until she lived independently in a Porchlight project and got support from staff in coming to terms with her sexuality. “Some friends knew, but my family didn't know. I felt like I was living two different lives.”

Before moving into supported accommodation, she didn't feel comfortable in disclosing her sexual orientation. “At interview stage I didn't tell them that I was a lesbian, because I was scared that somehow it would get out to my family.”

Chloe now lives in specialist supported housing for people with mental health issues. Her family know she is a lesbian, with the exception of her grandmother who Chloe thinks would never understand.



Adam - 18

Adam left home on the day that he came out to his mother at the age of 16. His parents lived separately, but he couldn't stay with either of them. “My dad used to say things like ‘those jeans are so gay’, and my brother used to say that he thought gay people should be killed”. His mother abused him physically and emotionally throughout his childhood, and in the end he felt as though he had to choose between living with domestic violence or homophobic abuse. He chose neither and fled. As a result of all this, he battled with serious mental health issues throughout his adolescence. After leaving specialist mental health care, he had nowhere to go, and was forced to move into homelessness accommodation.

One of the reasons Adam felt safe in coming out was that he had seen somebody on TV come out to his family and they were accepting and loving towards him anyway. Unfortunately this was not the case for Adam when he came out himself.

Recommendations

There are many things we, as housing and homelessness providers, can do to make this difficult time bearable for the young people that experience homelessness due to their sexual orientation or gender identity concerns. These are relatively small steps that will make a huge difference in terms of the environment we provide and whether young people feel safe within our services.

Information

- **Un-taboo the subject:** make sure that the topic is talked about openly in hostels/projects/shelters without any inhibitions. Making it a natural thing to talk about will encourage people who are not 'out' to feel at ease if they decide to take that step.
- **Challenge daily homophobia:** discourage people from name-calling and saying things like “that's so gay,” and challenge any abusive behaviour on the spot so that everyone is aware of the stance of staff in the organisation.
- **Visible information:** have at least one poster about a support group, for example Stonewall posters and anything that mentions LGBTQ. This indicates that it is an LGBTQ-friendly space and tells people that they can be themselves without fear of stigmatisation.

Training and monitoring

- **Staff training:** ensure that staff are aware of current issues regarding sexual orientation and gender identity concerns, what the different terms mean and how to approach the subject. If no internal training is available, try if possible to seek out external training and/or ensure that the subject is brought up among staff in the organisation.

- **Monitoring:** how monitoring is carried out will have a huge impact on numbers and subsequently on funding, so it is highly important to ensure that staff feel comfortable in asking the necessary questions for accurate monitoring.

Staff also need to continuously update records, as and when sexual or gender identity is disclosed (which may not be until a relationship has been established). A further suggestion is that organisations monitor 'questioning' of sexual and gender identities, as this will also flag the need for further support for those that are unsure of their identities.¹⁵

Peer support and mentoring

- **Role models:** if possible, ensure that there are positive role models available for young people in the area. If there are no staff members to carry out mentoring, then look in the local area for LGBTQ groups that can provide this.
- **Support:** offer support for the emotional distress of having been excluded from home, and possibly friends, due to coming out. Indicate useful websites for specialist support and refer to mental health services if necessary.

Prevention

If there is a possibility to work with young people before they come out to parents/carers at home, try to talk about when is going to be a good time to come out, how to come out and how to avoid any possible difficulties at home. It is important that they feel they have the emotional support and safety net for this step.

Conclusions

This report shows that the reasons for high numbers of homeless LGBTQ are multiple and complex. Young people can face issues in the family home as a result of homophobia and subsequent disruption with family members, but this is only one of many paths into homelessness and not at all the most prevalent one. Other reasons could be, for example, mental health issues derived from suppressed feelings and anxieties about sexual or gender identity, or young people fleeing closed-minded environments.

Those who live in open and friendly environments with suitable role models feel more able to experiment with sexual and/or gender identities, which leads to a rise in 'questioning' youth in such places. The research shows that young people are often not familiar with the category 'questioning' and would not apply this to themselves at monitoring unless it is explained to them, and as a consequence will use the label 'bisexual'. The average age of coming out is lower today than even a decade ago, which means young people that are still economically reliant on parents/carers are at greater risk of homelessness due to coming out at this age.

It has been flagged that it is highly important for service providers to have clearly visible information regarding LGBTQ groups and support when possible, and to encourage staff and service users to speak openly about the subject. Staff training regarding LGBTQ concerns is recommended, including how to approach monitoring questions. Monitoring is imperative and should be carried out with great sensitivity and updated continuously throughout support, in order to get more realistic numbers of LGBTQ youth with housing concerns and need of homelessness provision.

LGBTQ youth homelessness is currently a highly important issue and despite societal advances in LGBTQ rights, the concern for homeless LGBTQ youth is only growing. We hope that this report will open up a debate and some thought for this group, who are one of our most marginalised, stigmatised and excluded, and unfortunately, mostly invisible. Making homeless LGBTQ youth visible to housing and homelessness providers and to the general public is the first step in making a difference for a group that, so far, has been neglected and overlooked.

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