1 INTRODUCTION: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Alex Abramovich & Jama Shelton

Try living in a world where it's hard enough to love yourself, but even harder to be accepted. Going into a place where you think you can be safe, going into a place where you assume you can get help, but every door you try to open is locked or sealed shut. You're trying to walk back to where you started, but that door is also locked. You try very hard to break down that door. Once you get through, you realize you cannot be you.

A, 23 years old

Young people experiencing homelessness make up 20% of the homeless population in Canada (Gaetz, Gulliver, & Richter, 2014). Recent data on the prevalence of youth homelessness in Canada includes the first pan-Canadian study of young people experiencing homelessness, *Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*, which involved 1,103 respondents from 47 communities across 10 provinces and territories (Gaetz, O'Grady, Kidd, & Schwan, 2016). Over the course of one year, approximately 40,000 young people experience homelessness in Canada, and between 6,000 and 7,000 do so on any given night (Gaetz et al., 2016). Homelessness among families and dependent children and youth has recently been cited as an invisible and growing problem across Canada (Gulliver-Garcia, 2016).[1]

Accurate data on the prevalence of youth homelessness in the United States (U.S.) are lacking, due to challenges collecting this data and inconsistent definitions of youth homelessness (Anthony & Fisher, 2016). The U.S. annual Point-in-Time (PiT) count identified 180,760 children and youth under the age of 25 experiencing homelessness in January 2015 (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015). Almost one-quarter of those were unaccompanied young people under the age of 25 (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015).

Data on the prevalence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and Two-Spirit (LGBTQ2S) youth experiencing homelessness are also lacking; however, it has been

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[1] Between January and April 2016, the Government of Canada supported the first homeless count coordinated between 30 communities across Canada, employing a Point-in-Time (PiT) count approach; however, results were not yet available when this introduction was written.

known for over two decades that LGBTQ2S youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population, and are often unsafe in emergency shelters and housing programs (O'Brien, Travers, & Bell, 1993; Ray, 2006; Savin-Williams, 1994). Though a growing body of research examines LGBTQ2S youth homelessness, gaps in knowledge remain, and large-scale data collection continues to be limited. Research shows that LGBTQ2S youth make up a disproportionate number of youth experiencing homelessness in North America (Abramovich, 2012; Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015; Durso & Gates, 2012; Maccio & Ferguson, 2015; Kipke, Weiss, & Wong 2007; Quintana et al., 2010; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). Estimated to comprise 20–40% of the overall homeless youth population, the percentage of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness is at least three times greater than the percentage of the general LGBTQ2S youth population, which is thought to be between 5–10% of the overall youth population (Crossley, 2015; Josephson & Wright, 2000; Quintana et al., 2010). *The National Youth Homelessness Survey*, which recently surveyed 1,103 youth experiencing homelessness across Canada, found that 29.5% of young people surveyed self-identified as LGBTQ2S, while 6% self-identified as transgender, Two-Spirit, and non-binary (Gaetz et al., 2016). A recent survey of street outreach programs in the U.S. found that 7% of 656 young people surveyed self-identified as transgender (Whitbeck, Lazoritz, Crawford, & Hautala, 2014).

It is difficult to measure precisely how many youth experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ2S, for a variety of reasons:

Data Collection

- Research on youth experiencing homelessness, street needs assessments, and PiT counts, as well as youth-serving organizations, shelters and housing programs have missed important opportunities to collect data on gender and sexually diverse youth because they seldom include questions regarding LGBTQ2S identity, and when they do, they frequently do not include transgender and non-binary identities. For example, intake forms often provide options for individuals to identify only as either female or male—and sometimes 'other'—however, staff routinely complete intake forms for youth, checking off female or male based on what they perceive the young person's sex to be. Any identity that does not fall into those two fixed categories is rarely included.
- In order to collect accurate data, program staff and those conducting surveys need adequate training to ask questions concerning gender and sexual identity in a sensitive manner, while also making sure that every respondent is asked the same questions, regardless of whether they are perceived by the questioner to identify as LGBTQ2S.

- Studies have frequently grouped trans people under the label *sexual minority*, making it difficult to differentiate between gender identity and sexual identity. While gender identity and sexuality overlap, they are not the same. Including transgender and gender-expansive young people in a sexual minority category, rather than allowing them a separate category, replicates the common misreading of transgender people as homosexual (Shelley, 2009). Referred to by Ansara (2010) as coercive queering, this practice results in an underrepresentation of transgender youth in research, and can lead to a lack of safe, inclusive, affirming and effective services and systems for transgender youth experiencing homelessness (Shelton, 2015).

Data Synthesis

- Even when youth do self-identify as LGBTQ2S, accurate prevalence rates are dependent on a community's or system's data management program having been set up to include data on gender and sexual identity, as well as the larger data management systems at the community, regional and national levels having been designed to capture and integrate this data.

Safety Concerns

- Enumeration barriers exist even when individual programs do collect data on gender and sexual identity because LGBTQ2S youth may not feel safe disclosing their sexual or gender identity, opting to hide their identities for safety.
- The expectation that every young person will fit into the gender binary makes the shelter system and housing programs especially difficult places for transgender and gender-expansive individuals to navigate.
- Many youth are not enumerated at all because they do not access services out of safety concerns. Hidden homelessness is a significant issue among LGBTQ2S youth, especially for those living in rural and remote communities, making it difficult for them to be included in statistics and key reports on youth homelessness.

I was taking so many sleeping pills, so that I could sleep through the night. […] It was safer for me to be popping pills and sleeping outside in minus zero degree weather than being in the shelter system [because of] transphobia and homophobia.

J, 26 years old

Family conflict is the most frequently cited pathway to youth homelessness, regardless of gender or sexual identity (Cull, Platzer, & Balloch, 2006; Gaetz, 2014; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Karabanow, 2004). Identity-based family conflict resulting from a young person coming out as LGBTQ2S is a major contributing factor to youth homelessness and the most frequently cited reason for homelessness in queer and trans youth (Abramovich, 2016; Choi et al., 2015; Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002). Compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers, LGBTQ2S youth face an increased risk of homelessness and experience homelessness for longer periods (Choi et al., 2015; Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013). The experience of homelessness is different for LGBTQ2S youth compared to heterosexual and cisgender youth for various reasons, including high rates of social stigma, and homophobic and transphobic violence on the streets and at shelters and support services. LGBTQ2S youth are particularly vulnerable to mental health difficulties, and face an increased risk of physical and sexual exploitation, substance use and suicide (Denomme-Welch, Pyne, & Scanlon, 2008; Ray, 2006).

Transgender youth have needs that are distinct from those of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth. For example, they may need transition-related health care, including access to hormones or surgery, and/or support changing legal identification (ID) and with a legal name change. Because most programs serving youth experiencing homelessness are not set up with transgender youth in mind, they often replicate the cisnormative societal structures that create barriers for transgender and gender-expansive youth (Shelton, 2015). Shelter staff generally receive minimal trans competency training, resulting in a lack of understanding and awareness. This means staff may not understand the importance of asking youth what pronoun and name they go by, or on which floor they would feel safest sleeping. A high proportion of transgender and gender-expansive youth report being denied access to shelters on the basis of their gender identity (Grant et al., 2011; Hussey, 2015). Transgender women of colour are often the most underrepresented group in shelters and housing programs and frequently experience severe marginalization based on their gender and sexual identity, race, class, and age (Grant et al., 2011; Mottet & Ohle, 2003; Sakamoto et al., 2010). Family rejection, poverty, a lack of specialized social services and discrimination in housing and shelters, employment, and education all make it extremely difficult for LGBTQ2S youth to secure safe and affirming places to live. Even when programs have worked to become inclusive and affirming of LGBTQ2S youth, engagement in services may still be perceived as risky by the youth.

I didn't want to go to a public shelter. 'Cuz it was, like, I just heard really bad things about it.

J, 24 years old

Systemic cissexism and heterosexism that erase the needs of LGBTQ2S youth, coupled with widespread homophobic and transphobic discrimination and violence in shelters and housing programs, have resulted in LGBTQ2S youth being underrepresented in such programs.

National Efforts in Canada

LGBTQ2S youth homelessness has been acknowledged as an emergent crisis in Canada for over two decades (O'Brien, Travers, & Bell, 1993); however, this issue has been neglected and inadequately addressed for years. Until fairly recently, there were no specialized housing programs for LGBTQ2S youth in Canada. The first such programs have opened in Canada only in the past two years. For example, in 2015, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary opened a Host Homes program in Calgary, Alberta. RainCity opened a Housing First program for LGBTQ2S youth in Vancouver, British Columbia in 2015 (see Case Study 5.1). In 2016, the City of Toronto allocated funds to open Canada's first Transitional Housing program for LGBTQ2S youth through YMCA, Sprott House (see Case Study 5.3). However, there are still no specialized emergency shelters in Canada to specifically meet the needs of LGBTQ2S youth.

Key decision-makers across Canada have not responded appropriately to the needs of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness, and instead have continuously asked for more evidence-based research to implement changes to existing services and policies or to develop new programs and policies. It has taken years of community advocacy, research, creative knowledge mobilization and downright activism to provide the necessary evidence to move forward by including LGBTQ2S youth in important national dialogue on youth homelessness. In 2015, the Government of Alberta released a targeted response to prevent and end youth homelessness: the Youth Plan (Government of Alberta, 2015). The Youth Plan recognized that ending youth homelessness requires prioritizing subpopulations of young people disproportionately represented in the population of youth experiencing homelessness, including LGBTQ2S youth. This led to Canada's first

provincial government strategy to address the needs of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness and the first provincial working group on LGBTQ2S youth homelessness (Abramovich, 2015) (see Case Study 9.1).

In 2015, the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness developed a national LGBTQ2S Toolkit to provide service providers across Canada with the resources they need to better support LGBTQ2S youth accessing services (National Learning Community, 2015).

We need a committed national strategy to end LGBTQ2S youth homelessness. This will allow us to respond to the unique needs of LGBTQ2S youth in both rural and urban communities, and from one province to another. The strategy must place specialized housing with integrated supports at the forefront, along with comprehensive mandatory LGBTQ2S cultural competency training for staff at drop-in and housing programs. A national strategy to end LGBTQ2S youth homelessness is a promise that we will no longer tolerate homophobia, transphobia or biphobia. It's a message to the world that everyone deserves a safe place to sleep, and no young person should end up on the streets because of whom they love or how they identify.

National Efforts in the U.S.

LGBTQ2S youth homelessness was recognized as an urgent national issue in the U.S. in 2006, with a publication from the National LGBTQ Task Force, *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness*. This publication illuminated the local work of programs serving LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness in multiple locations across the country. The programs were either specifically designed for LGBTQ2S youth or provided services designed to be safe, inclusive and affirming of LGBTQ2S youth. In the decade that followed, several key efforts contributed to a growing national movement in the U.S. to end LGBTQ2S youth homelessness. These efforts have included the launch of the True Colors Fund, the first national organization focused solely on the issue of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness, and the LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness Prevention Initiative. In addition, national efforts to more broadly address youth homelessness by including LGBTQ2S youths' perspectives include A Way Home America and Voices of Youth Count. Each initiative is briefly described below.

The True Colors Fund was founded in 2008 to raise awareness about and bring an end to LGBTQ2S youth homelessness. Through a combination of education, training, advocacy and collaboration with youth, the True Colors Fund has mobilized cross-sector collaboratives in communities around the country to address LGBTQ2S youth homelessness. The organization hosts a free network, called the 40 to None Network, for those interested in joining the movement. The name comes from the often-cited statistic that up to 40% of youth experiencing homelessness identify as LGBTQ2S, and the goal of taking that percentage from 40 to none. Additional resources include: an online learning platform called TrueU; an online directory of LGBTQ2S-inclusive and affirming programs for youth experiencing homelessness; an assessment tool to assist youth-serving systems and programs to increase their LGBTQ2S competency; and numerous downloadable toolkits to assist with local PiT counts, community planning initiatives, and making programs safe, supportive and accessible for transgender youth.

To help address the overrepresentation of LGBTQ2S youth in the population of youth experiencing homelessness, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), initiated the first-of-its-kind LGBTQ Youth Homelessness Prevention Initiative (Initiative) in 2014. The Initiative was developed and supported by five U.S. federal partners—the U.S. departments of Housing and Urban Development; Education; Health and Human Services; Justice; and the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH)—in partnership with the True Colors Fund. The Initiative began with two communities that developed local, community-wide prevention plans, which included strategies for preventing LGBTQ2S youth from becoming homeless and intervening as early as possible if they do become homeless. The Initiative identified two goals. 1) Facilitate better local collaboration between stakeholders working with youth and families, including local child welfare, education and law enforcement agencies; service providers to runaway and homeless youth; LGBTQ2S organizations; and other local stakeholders. 2) Help federal agencies and local communities learn more about implementing community-wide strategies for preventing homelessness in LGBTQ2S youth at risk of becoming homeless, and intervening early when homelessness occurs. The Initiative and the local plans were grounded in the four core outcomes outlined in the USICH's *Framework to End Youth Homelessness:* stable housing, permanent connections, education/employment and social-emotional wellbeing.

Voices of Youth Count (VoYC) is a national initiative working to expand knowledge about the scope and scale of youth homelessness in the U.S., and to deepen the understanding of the experiences of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness. VoYC seeks to contribute to the movement to prevent and end youth homelessness in the U.S. by building knowledge, integrating new information with existing evidence, and working with policy makers, program developers and service providers to put that knowledge into action. They are also committed to partnering with youth in all aspects of this work. VoYC recognizes that preventing and ending youth homelessness requires understanding the experiences of LGBTQ2S youth. As such, the data collection instruments they use and the resources they provide to the public include measures related to sexual orientation and gender identity. This approach recognizes that large-scale efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness must explicitly include LGBTQ2S youth.

A Way Home America (AWHA) is a national initiative, modeled after A Way Home Canada, to build the movement to prevent and end homelessness in youth. Guided by *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, the collaborative is working toward a common goal: To prevent and end homelessness among all youth and young adults by 2020; and to ensure that homelessness among youth and young adults is rare, and when it does occur, that experiences of homelessness are brief and one-time. The collaborative consists of service providers, young people with lived experience of homelessness, researchers, government agencies, advocates and philanthropists. Like VoYC, AWHA recognizes that preventing and ending homelessness for youth requires a focus on subpopulations that are overrepresented in the population of youth experiencing homelessness. AWHA highlights LGBTQ2S youth and racialized youth in their work.

> *Everybody seems to be down and when we have these pressures [homophobia], well guess what? Now people have to guard themselves all the time. That guy's crying, this girl's crying, that kid looks so sad, this kid just wants to talk to somebody, that kid's dying on the inside. It's a big problem. There's a big social thing going on here with all the kids and they're all dying to just talk to somebody. [...] A community would look like people looking out for the best interests of kids; that's a community. I'm Native, we know that. It's about the kids; it's not about nobody else. You're supposed to be watching out for them, no matter what.*
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> R, 26 years old

Why this Book?

This book represents efforts to address LGBTQ2S youth homelessness that are currently underway, in both Canada and the U.S. The book is organized by 10 chapters that focus on LGBTQ2S youth homelessness through an intersectional lens, including an examination of the needs of that population, the identity-related structural barriers LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness face in accessing adequate services and in achieving successful transitions out of homelessness, and program models that successfully address those barriers. Each chapter, rooted in either empirical research or through a more theoretical orientation, addresses a specific need and that need's associated barriers, accompanied by a case study of a successful program intervention exemplifying how to put the chapter's information into action. The anticipated outcome of this book will be the sharing of new knowledge to inform the development of LGBTQ2S-inclusive and affirming systems and service provision at the community, regional and national levels.

Through our work, we have found that factors such as institutional erasure and homophobic and transphobic violence and discrimination that is rarely dealt with, addressed, or even noticed, make it difficult for LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness to access shelters and supportive services. The result is queer and trans youth feeling safer on the streets than in shelters and housing programs. We hope this book will motivate the reader to make change in their own corner of the world. The issue of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness can no longer be denied. Our youth can no longer be silenced and ignored.

It is time to take action.

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Dr. Abramovich has been addressing the issue of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness for over 10 years. His program of research focuses on access to mental health and housing programs, and the ways broader policy issues create oppressive contexts for LGBTQ2S youth. Dr. Abramovich has worked closely with municipal and provincial governments to develop strategies that address the needs of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness.

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Dr. Shelton has over 15 years of experience working with queer and trans youth, the last 10 of which were focused specifically on the issue of homelessness. Dr. Shelton has worked in the areas of direct clinical practice with queer and trans youth experiencing homelessness, as well as program development, program evaluation, research, technical assistance and training.