

The Devastating Price of Honesty: Gay, Poor & Homeless

by

Claire (Henry) Lovell

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Sponsor: Dr. Jason Pine

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A note on terms:

Youth refers to any person between the ages of 13 and 21.

Homeless, in this context, are persons who have been forced out of their homes of origin by their parents or guardians.

LGBTQ is any person self identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or any other variant of considering themselves homosexual in some form or degree.

Deindustrialization describes the United States shift away from low-skilled, living wage, factory employment that had employed many people post World War II and helped contribute to a large American middle class.

Introduction

Faced with intense discrimination from their peers, families, and teachers, many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) students dropout of school or are kicked out of their homes. Due to conflicts at home with parents regarding sexual orientation and gender expression, LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in homeless populations, comprising approximately 20 to 40 percent of homeless youth populations in big cities (Fernandes-Alcantara 2016, p. 7). Social services organizations offer some help to a limited number of LGBTQ youth at risk of living on the streets with no job, housing, or education with a safe environment in which to finish their high school education. For a select few, these organizations provide these LGBTQ youth with a set of skills that will carry them safely into a healthy adulthood. But for many LGBTQ youth, their needs are not even addressed by the vast majority of social service organizations and therefore they must seek alternative methods to survive. Many LGBTQ youth turn to coping methods such as survival sex, criminal behavior and co-dependency with other socially excluded people (Cahill, Ellen, and Tobias 2002, p. 128). How do these youth survive in the face of such limited options? Are these youth able to make ends meet as adults? What can social service organizations do to truly meet the needs of these adolescents? I will try to answer these important questions using fieldwork research methods.

My fieldwork is an ethnographic study of New York City based LGBTQ homeless youth and the methods they use to adjust to their poverty and limited resources. I will examine the societal structures that influence LGBTQ youth on an individual level, and document their personal experiences in order to create a meaningful discourse on this neglected group. Interviews were done with participants in two time periods, 2006-2007 and 2018. As a highly stigmatized population, participant observation methods are difficult, however, as a young LGBTQ person, I was able to achieve a fairly high level of access and was not regarded as an

outsider. During the initial interview period of 2006-2007 I was still considered a “youth” I was able to attend youth meetings at the LGBTQ Center in New York and talk to participants afterwards. In addition, my personal experiences have allowed me to meet homeless LGBTQ youth as well as afford an understanding of the issues they face. I will use these observations to extrapolate to and strengthen my own findings.

Research specifically about homeless LGBTQ youth, and additionally with a New York City focus, is fairly limited. I have relied on the anthropological discourses of poverty and homelessness, social exclusion, and social service organizations in order to have a theoretical framework to contextualize my own fieldwork. My fieldwork will fill in what I believe is a gap in LGBTQ studies by discussing the poverty and coping methods of LGBTQ youth.

Resilience In the Face of Adversity: the Literature

Despite the inherent lack of resources LGBTQ homeless youth face, they display a tremendous resilience to try to overcome these barriers. In the following sections, I will explore how these young people form their gender identities and sexual orientations, how social services can support or harm their experience of homelessness, how poverty plays a key role in their struggle, and how community support can be a beacon of hope in propelling youth out of homelessness and poverty.

LGBTQ Youth Identity Formation

The formation of an LGBTQ identity is a fairly new phenomenon. With the emergence of capitalism as a global force, a gay or lesbian identity has only recently become possible. In a pre-industrial society, though gay and lesbian behaviors existed, it was not possible to formulate an identity based on those behaviors. Men and women needed married heterosexual unions in order to survive an agrarian lifestyle, and children were necessary as unpaid help. Upon the advent of capitalism, it became possible for men (and much later, women) to live autonomously as well as financially feasible to live with same-sex partners. Therefore, a lesbian or gay identity only became an option within the last century (D’Emilio 1997, p. 53). However, pre-Stonewall, gays and lesbians rarely came out in adolescence, if at all. Not only was heterosexuality presumed of pre-Stonewall gays and lesbians by the general populace, most assumed it themselves until well into adulthood (Savin-Williams 2002, p. 50). After Stonewall and the subsequent gay and lesbian civil rights movement, gay and lesbian identity became possible at earlier and earlier ages, as did more diverse identities and labels paving the way for teenagers to call themselves anything from pansexual to transgendered to lesbian. Therefore, the study of LGBTQ youth has only become possible during the last 40-45 years, as LGBTQ-identified youth literally did not exist previously.

As the average age of coming out is now 16 for females and 15.6 for males (Savin-Williams 2002, p. 163), the single greatest challenge facing all LGBTQ youth is the coming out process and the discrimination that exposes them to. Even as our society in general may grow towards more acceptance of LGBTQ people, many LGBTQ people are discriminated against

(Mays and Cochran 2001, p. 1874). High schools are often the worst place for LGBTQ teens in America, most hearing gay epithets all day long. For example, 67.4% of students in 2015 reported hearing the word “gay” being used in a negative way, 58.8 % heard homophobic remarks like “fag” and “dyke,” and 40.5% reported hearing disparaging remarks about transgender students (Kosciw et al. 2016, p. 15-16). Students also feel unsafe. Four in ten (43.3%) of students feel unsafe because of how they express their gender, while six in ten feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation (57.6%), avoiding bathrooms and locker areas because those spaces increase this feeling of unease (Kosciw et al. 2016, p. 11). Unfortunately, students also experience harassment and assault. Over three quarters (85.2%) of students were verbally harassed, over a third (34.7%) were physically harassed, and one in six (15.5%) of students were physically assaulted at school (Kosciw et al. 2016, pp. 21-23).

Youth sexuality is often denied or not talked about, and many LGBTQ teens have adults tell them that they are “too young” to know what their sexual preferences are. Some of even the most accepting parents have a hard time coming to terms with their children’s homosexuality, most parents taking time to accept it, if at all. Many parents tell their children that it’s “just a phase” or tried to convince them to change. However, even if families are accepting of their children, eventually LGBTQ youth will be in a situation where their identity is stigmatized.

Erving Goffman’s *Stigma* (1964) is a sociological look at “normative expectations” and people who do not meet these expectations. Goffman defines stigma as an “undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (Seeman and Goffman 1964, p. 5). Individuals with a stigma will have diminished life chances. That is to say that people who belong to a marked category, whether that be their actual (lived) or virtual (perceived) social identity, will not have the same opportunities as those considered “normal.” Actual and virtual stigmas may be the same if the person has no stigmas or their stigmas are immediately apparent.

Though being gay may not always be a readily apparent stigma, LGBTQ people experience more discrimination and perceived discrimination than their straight counterparts (Mays and Cochran 2001, p. 1874). Membership in a stigmatized group decreases life chances, and for an adolescent’s developing identity, it is particularly detrimental to their ideas of self-worth. LGBTQ youth are judged harshly by their peers, parents and supposed mentors, and the lack of positive LGBTQ role models for LGBTQ youth leads to a particularly dismal view of themselves and their futures (D’Augelli 1998, p. 191). Many teenagers feel isolated, but LGBTQ youth are made to feel as though they are rare and freakish anomalies. “For most [LGBTQ] youths, the risk associated with expressing their feelings are learned vicariously as they observe penalties that open [LGBTQ] youths and adults experience” (D’Augelli 1998, p. 191). In other words, these teenagers learn that to be gay is to be discriminated against, to be underprivileged, to live a life of difficulty.

The formation of a LGBTQ identity, therefore, is one that is difficult to accept for many. For LGBTQ youth, their identity is postulated as impossible (Gilliam 2003, p. 1051) and then pathologized (Cahill, Ellen, and Tobias 2002, p. 101). When an LGBTQ person becomes aware of their sexual orientation, they are faced with an alien identity. For example, unlike race,

another stigmatized category, this is not a stigma one's family will necessarily share, and in addition, this identity is adopted after a sense of self has already developed. Since gay identity does not develop until young adulthood or later, newly identified LGBTQ youth must completely re-consider their role and future in society. For people who were not stigmatized before, this reconciliation can be especially hard as they move from the position of "unmarked" to stigmatized. As long as this is their identity, they will no longer have access to the same privileges as they had previously enjoyed or imagined for their future. For some who are already members of stigmatized communities, this may be a double or triple stigma that may alienate them from heterosexuals in their community who share some of their other stigmatized identities. They are left with no support in their birth-stigmatized community and experience the discrimination of their other identities in their new stigmatized community. Thus the formation of gay identity is an important one to consider when discussing the welfare of LGBTQ youth. It is a huge alteration to the course of their lives. LGBTQ youth, are often "in direct conflict with others, including family and peers, as well as with traditional social institutions such as "the family," organized religion, and, most important, schools" (D'Augelli 1998, p. 188).

When LGBTQ youth are coming to terms with their sexuality, a poor reception by their parents and peers may permanently lower their self-esteem and their conception of LGBTQ adulthood. Many LGBTQ youth, anticipating their parents' adverse reaction, may try to hide their sexuality for as long as possible. For transgender youth this may be a less viable option, while some LGBTQ youth may just not want to hide. As most LGBTQ youth now come out during adolescence, dealing with parents' reactions is becoming an increasing problem. One study found that only 11 percent of LGBTQ youth coming out to their parents experienced a supportive reaction (Cahill, Ellen, and Tobias 2002, p. 102). Some parents restrict their child's freedoms to a point that they have no social life, and therefore no gay life, hoping they will be able to set them on the straight and narrow. Some may try transformative ministries to try and change their child's orientation. Small minorities of parents are accepting (eventually), but in a society where homophobia and heterosexism is often destigmatized, LGBTQ youth still have a long way until coming out becomes easy. For some LGBTQ youth, living conditions with their parents become so hostile that they run away or their parents evict them onto the streets.

Youth on the streets have little money and very probably have not finished their high school education, have few or no job skills, and have nowhere to live. Just surviving is a difficult task. LGBTQ youth may not know any social service agencies that meet their needs, and organizations they do know about may not be available to them as minors without guardians. LGBTQ youth are most often the ones on the street, thrown out by their families, ignored by their schools, and dismissed by homeless youth programs despite making up a large percentage of homeless youth.

Construction of Gay Identity in Response to Media and Technology

Popular media depictions, increased acceptance of gays and lesbians, and the new level of support many LGBTQ youth can now find online make constructing sexual and gender

identity easier for youth. This can influence coming out age, self-esteem, and confidence. For example, “studies of adolescent sexual orientation show that the age of ‘coming out’ or self-identification as lesbian or gay has been dropping steadily” (Gilliam 2003, p. 1051). As Internet access has become readily available to the masses, LGBTQ youth are able to reach out to other LGBTQ people via chat rooms and message boards as well as easily access information. This has permitted LGBTQ teens to combat their feelings of isolation, often digitally coming out and finding “likeness” online (Craig & McInroy, 2014, p. 95). Furthermore, being able to address their same-sex desires in an anonymous environment has enabled LGBTQ youth to label their identities at early ages.

Marginalized people who are unable to express their needs and identities in the so-called real world, such as gay youth in homophobic...contexts, can share interests and experiences in interactive discussion forums (chat rooms), forming classic "communities without propinquities," spaces of shared interest without physical proximity (Warf and Grimes 1997, p. 263).

The Problems of Youth Social Services

Joseph Hawes *The Children's Rights Movement* (1991) takes an in depth look at the history and current state child protections, laws, and social service organizations. Hawes explains that the very limited rights children do have were hard won. Adults do not endow children with many rights because of their age. Children are not considered cognizant enough of their own situation to know what is in their “best interests”. This is then the crux of the problem of children’s rights. They are not in a position to fight for their own rights and must rely on adults to fight for them. For LGBTQ youth who have no adults who want to care for them, this system is limited. Children have extremely limited ways of accessing public aid, and that is through their parents or a social service agency. Teenagers whose parents cannot or will not care for them become wards of the state, and often live in group homes, or with foster parents. Bearing this in mind, the financial situation for a LGBTQ homeless teen can often be hopeless. If an LGBTQ youth is evicted from their home, they must go through a social service organization in order to obtain housing and financial help. Hawes main point is that children’s services are extremely lacking and need improvement, but at the same time, they are the only, though limited, option.

Unfortunately, some agencies that exist to protect children turn out to be harmful to them. This is often the case for LGBTQ teens that must deal with social service agencies’ homophobia.

Child protectionists want to expand the protective agencies, and expand their reach as well. Child liberationists, perhaps frustrated by the long history of ineffectual efforts to protect children, wish to grant full or nearly full autonomy to them (Hawes, 1991, p. 125).

Both of these approaches to children's rights may work in individual cases, but neither will work for all youth. Some social service agencies wish to completely regulate the lives of the youth they serve. This could be a potential problem for LGBTQ youth, as the personnel of a social service agency may be biased against them, and complete regulation of their lives by such people would be detrimental rather than helpful. However, granting a 15-year-old full autonomy may not be the solution either, and a lack of structure may prove to hamper the growth of the child. Additionally, for someone that young who has no concept of caring for themselves, they may not be able to responsibly manage their own lives, and I wonder if they should even be expected to before the age of 18. Social service agencies that aim to meet the needs of youth such as these then face the problem of deciding where the delicate balance between too much care and too little care lies.

LGBTQ youth are often not even aware of social service groups that could help them, and even if they are aware of some, they might not know about any LGBTQ friendly organizations. LGBTQ teenagers may often be even worse off in group homes and foster care due to homophobia by the very people who are supposed to be protecting them. For many LGBTQ youth who go through social service organizations, the same problems they experienced with their parents are replicated.

For example, gay youth have been beaten by other residents while staff watched; taunted by foster parents, staff, and other residents because of their homosexuality; sexually assaulted by staff members; and, forced to undergo conversion therapy in an attempt to teach them that being gay or lesbian is, "repulsive and deviant" (Gilliam 2003, p. 1039).

When social service organizations shun LGBTQ youth, they have nowhere else to go but the streets. They are made to feel as though they are not cared about by anyone.

State governments' and the foster care agencies' failure to take actions that are in the best interests of the children under their care often leads to increased levels of drug use, homelessness, street prostitution, and even suicide—situations that are a reality already for far too many LGBTQ teens (Gilliam 2003, p. 1037).

Due to these issues, "as many as 40-50% of this population do not use these services" (Kipke and Unger 1997, p. 655)

In *Honey, Honey, Miss Thang: Being Black, Gay and on the Streets* (1996), Leon Pettway discusses the experiences of "Shontae" who was raised by foster parents and started realizing his gay identity at the age of 12. Shontae describes being a good student who got along well with his mother. Once he started having gay friends and picking men up, he began sneaking around and lying to his mother, which basically destroyed their relationship. He discusses stealing supplies for drag balls and skipping school to hang out with other gay kids, and trying to

pick up older men. As his relationship with his mother progressively worsened, he eventually left home at the age of seventeen and turned to prostitution to survive. He was unaware of social service institutions that could have possibly offered him living quarters, and did not know of any other options besides prostitution.

LGBTQ Youth and Poverty

LGBTQ youth are faced with the threefold problems of being gay, young, and poor. Since the passing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, it has become increasingly difficult to obtain public aid. Welfare reform (Temporary Aid to Needy Families in its current form) has delegated most of the responsibility for welfare to the states, and imposed a lifetime limit of five years that one can receive aid as well as imposed a work requirement. This has supposedly lessened poverty, as:

...national cash assistance (TANF) caseloads have been halved since 1996; roughly two thirds of those who leave welfare are employed when they go off TANF; and the national poverty rate has declined modestly (Morgen and Maskovsky 2003, p. 323).

In actuality, all this has served to achieve is a lessening of the caseloads but not an actual lessening of poverty, and actually most people who relied on welfare for a part of their income are now worse off. The unemployed serve as to depress wages for all workers as they ensure that workers are highly replaceable and do not have the bargaining power to demand higher wages. In the face of this poverty living conditions have become incredible difficult for the poor in general and especially for homeless LGBTQ youth. In fact, “the number of homeless youth living on the streets has increased because of the difficulties in accessing benefits due to welfare reform” (S. Cahill & Jones, 2001, pp. 9-10).

Due to deindustrialization, high paying, low skilled manufacturing jobs have gone the way of the dodo in the United States. These jobs have been replaced by service jobs. While not all service jobs are low paying, or even low skill, those that are will generally be much lower paid. In other words, we no longer have mass employment at high wages for low skills.

Union membership has also greatly decreased over the past thirty years, decreasing workers’ power and influence in the workplace, particularly in manufacturing jobs. Unions used to provide even those without high school degrees living wages with good jobs and benefits. With advances in technology, many elements of production can be done more cheaply with machines, further eliminating jobs.

In the U.S., this has lead to a huge increase in the service industry, which does employ low-skilled workers, but not in numbers previously achieved with manufacturing, mining, and other manual labor type work that does not require a college degree.

Thus, from this theoretical perspective, the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and similar policies pursued in the United States and Europe result from an abandonment of populations whose labor and health is no longer necessary to production in the global economy (Susser 1996, p. 413).

Thus, poverty among low-skilled workers has become an even more pervasive problem. Jobs that were once considered to be for teenagers, such as the classic McDonald's counter, are now one job of several in an adult's portfolio to make ends meet and feed their families. This reduces the options available for teenagers looking for work.

For homeless LGBTQ youth, their job options are limited. For those that do not conform to gender expectations, jobs are almost impossible to find, while limited education and lack of a permanent living space for these and other LGBTQ youth also decrease the likelihood of obtaining a job at all, much less one that pays a living wage. At the height of industrialization, living wages were readily available to low skilled workers, usually by joining a union. Even without a high school education, it was possible to support a family working in a factory. After deindustrialization, the skills and education needed to obtain jobs that paid a living wage increased dramatically. Low-skilled or poorly educated workers were forced to work in the service industry and become highly replaceable, and therefore easily fired. In the face of these limited options, LGBTQ youth are forced to turn to the underground economy to survive. While some may get support from older LGBTQ people, some must use prostitution or "criminal" activities as a last ditch effort to survive. For example, LGBTQ youth are 70 percent more likely than heterosexual homeless youth to engage in survival sex (Keuroghlian, Shtasel, & Bassuk, 2014, p. 4) In addition to these structural constraints that lead to poverty, other forms of discrimination are often exacerbated by their homeless status. "Homeless youth are vulnerable to victimization, including robbery, rape, and assault. Also, homelessness often leads to initiation or escalation of substance abuse" (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002, p. 773).

Gay male youth prostitution is not an uncommon activity among homeless youth and is often situational and temporary.

Several studies showed that whereas male juvenile prostitutes come from every socioeconomic stratum, the majority comes from working class and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. They tend to have little education: the average educational level...was 10th grade....Many of these boys have little or no knowledge of municipal, state or private services that could assist them (Coleman 1989, p. 135-136).

Some turn to a lighter form of prostitution, going on dates and readily agreeing to sex so that they have a place to sleep that night and perhaps a meal too.

Strength in Numbers: Community and LGBTQ Youth

Despite the overwhelming and persistent poverty of homeless LGBTQ youth, some youth do get the positive experience of validating their identity as they meet other LGBTQ youth. For those youth with an extreme lack of self-esteem, which can be especially debilitating at such a young and crucial age, some are able to affirm themselves by their own peers. “Peer relationships and social support have been demonstrated to be directly related to social competence, self-esteem, and overall well being and as buffers against the effect of stress” (Kipke and Unger 1997, p. 655).

Programs can also create a broader sense of community for LGBTQ youth. For example, the Supporting Our Youth program in Toronto offers a variety of mentorship and engagement programs that offer personal and connective activities (Lepischack, 2004).

As cultural awareness of LGBTQ issues increase, support for homeless youth follows suit. For example, following Hurricane Sandy, several celebrities drew attention to the wreckage of homeless youth shelters in lower Manhattan that served LGBTQ youth (Schulman, 2012). This, in turn, built public action for over \$100,000 of crowd-funded support. While not enough to completely rebuild, this type of larger community support for a marginalized population illustrates the importance of community.

Methodology

My research uses a combination of participant observation and life history methodologies, combined with a thorough literature review. In this section, I will outline my sampling, data collection, and data analysis approach. Taken together, this research will offer a view of the lives led by poor and homeless LGBTQ youth and methods of surviving in the face of adversity.

Sampling

I used two primary sampling methods to find candidates for my research: purposive and convenience sampling. I began with the purposive sampling approach to find appropriate subjects for this research (Bernard 2006, p. 190). I targeted LGBTQ homeless youth that were actively experiencing struggles or success, participating in social services, experiencing or had experienced poverty, and were able to articulate and discuss their identity. However, when finding a perfect fit became difficult, I switched to a convenience sampling approach (Bernard 2006, p. 191), which I was able to employ and gain access to subjects that fit most of my primary objectives.

To find appropriate youth, I frequented The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Community Center in New York (LGBTCC), located on West 13th Street, because it offered many youth programs under its Youth Enrichment Services (YES) from 2006-2007. Every Friday from 6-8, YES offered a Young Women’s Discussion group. Today in 2018, The Center no longer offers any youth groups. Similarly, the Hetrick Martin Institute (HMI) in Manhattan on Astor Place provides professional social support and programming for LGBTQ youth. Their

flagship program is the Harvey Milk High School (HMHS), a public school that offers at risk youth the opportunity to finish their schooling in a safe space. They offer a variety of after-school programs, counseling, and services for homeless or poor youth.

I also queried the Ali Forney for appropriate interview candidates. Ali Forney is a New York City based homeless LGBTQ youth organization offering drop in services as well as shelter. In Westchester County, I attempted to gather additional interview candidates from The Loft LGBT Center as well as Center Lane, an LGBT youth community center.

Although none of these latter three organizations were able to provide interview candidates who were willing to speak with me, it expanded the number of potential subjects.

Data Collection and Analysis

I used a variety of data collection techniques, depending on the limitations of the LGBTCC and HMI. My primary approach to gathering data was to use participant observation, building explicit awareness and memory of the details of LGBTQ homelessness (Bernard 2006, pp. 364-365). My goal was to use my experiences to write life histories of my subjects, draw conclusions about common and rare experiences, and discuss the challenges that face LGBTQ people who experience homelessness as they age. In other words:

Participant observation involves immersing yourself in a culture and learning to remove yourself every day from that immersion so you can intellectualize what you've seen and heard, put it into perspective and write about it convincingly (Bernard 2006, p. 344).

Each space in which I found my subjects had limitations regarding data collection. Because the LGBTCC is a confidential safe space, I was not able to take notes or use anything members have said in my research. However, I attended meetings as a participant and observer from 2006 - 2007. I used these meetings to get a broader understanding of the issues facing this population as well as to recruit participants for my study. After attending several meetings, I was invited to socialize with some of the people I had met in the group. This enabled me to become closer to them, as well as observe them in an unstructured setting. This has allowed me to obtain participants who trusted me to a degree and were willing to talk about their lives. I interviewed and interacted with several HMI graduates, and also met other poor LGBTQ youth there. Of those I have interviewed, they had already aged out of their programs (which end at 18) and recounted their experiences from memory. Because they are memories, their recollections may not be fully accurate, or provide a true impression of their mental state as youth, but rather their current impressions of their mental state in their youth.

In addition to participant observation and life histories, I have also read extensive queer theory, poverty theory, ethnographies of gay people living in poverty, psychological articles on LGBTQ youth, and anthropological theories of poverty which all provide me with an academic background to contextualize my fieldwork. None of these really discuss the real life

circumstances of homeless and poor LGBTQ youth, but rather offer an overview of their actions instead of detailing their lives.

I used life histories to discover methods they have used to cope with their poverty, as well as to get a sense of how they consider their own lives. Though I did not discover the coping methods of *all* New York's homeless LGBTQ youth population, I got a sense of some of the methods they have used to cope with their poverty as well as the effectiveness of the organizations in which they participate. The life histories provided me with a framework to compare the literature.

Findings

I gathered life histories for two individuals who will be called John and Eliana who had both participated in Hetrick Martin's programs. John and Eliana were both interviewed in 2007 and 2018. The following stories are their life histories.

John

2006-2007

A mutual friend introduced my first subject to me during his freshman year. At his first interview, John Scott (pseudonym) was a nineteen-year-old college sophomore. He is white and self identified as gay at the time. He is originally from Brooklyn, where he attended high school for two years before transferring to HMHS. John came out at age fourteen where he experienced intense discrimination from his peers and family. He became very depressed his sophomore year of high school and was hospitalized for a short period of time. By the end of his sophomore year, it became apparent that a change was needed for his mental health and well-being. A guidance counselor from his high school suggested Harvey Milk, and helped him through the rigorous application process. An intense needs assessment and interview was necessary before accepting John into the school for his junior year.

At the time, John was living with his mother, sister, and older brother Chris. His mother had throat cancer and was restricted to the home because she was so sick. As the eldest, Chris ran the household. One night in October of John's junior year of high school, he and Chris got into a fight. Chris believed the John was stealing from him, and the fight ended in Chris kicking John out of their home. John maintains that Chris was purposely looking to start a fight because he was very homophobic, did not get along with his brother, and resented John's close relationship with their mother. Chris and John's mother, Grace, did not want John to leave but was too sick to stop Chris from kicking him out.

John packed a bag and went to a homeless shelter for adolescents run by a church. John lived in the shelter for one month. The shelter's other occupants assumed he was rich simply because he was white. They figured he was a bratty teenager, and could go back home anytime he wanted. He lived there for one month. He was never given a roommate during his stay there. The one night he was almost given one, the other resident loudly proclaimed that they "didn't want to live with a queer" and was assigned to another room.

Eventually going through HMI's social workers and child services, John was assigned to a 25 bed, LGBTQ youth-specific Manhattan group home run by the Green Chimneys organization after being emancipated from his parents at age sixteen. His mother died soon after this, and his sister and brother went to live with his father and stepmother. John was able to live in the group home until he went to college, at which point he was on his own. He worked a full time job while at HMHS, and made enough more than enough money to live off of during his last two years of high school. He received financial aid and two scholarships that give him enough money for college and to live off of. As he wrapped up his final year of college, he reconciled with his father, and lived with him during holidays and breaks, but paid his own way for food, clothes, and anything else he needed. John was an excellent student at SUNY Purchase, and financially stable. HMHS prepared him well for college, and he is still benefiting from HMI's after school program that helped him receive the scholarships he lived from during this time.

2018

In 2018, I interviewed John again. He is now 33 and identifies as queer. He is married to another white male, age 30, who I will call Sam. John graduated from college in 2007 with a Continuing Education Liberal Studies Degree. He lives in New York City and is pursuing a Master of Social Work (MSW) and works for a LGBTQ community organization part time. He earns minimum wage as a youth educator, although previously he earned a living wage before leaving that job to pursue his master's degree. His previous job was in community health, a position he held most of the decade since college graduation, earning between \$40,000-\$70,000 per year. Previous to that, he worked in customer service at a pharmacy for the first three years post-college, earning a little more than minimum wage, approximately \$10-\$12 per hour. He has continued to make ends meet, despite low wages, due to very low rent compared to market value rents. Currently he would need to work 40 hours a week, for seven weeks, just to pay his monthly rent. However, he is able to make ends meet because Sam, his husband, makes low six figures and their rent is well below median New York City rent at approximately \$1600 per month. They use most of their extra income paying off student loans as well as fraudulent debts taken out in Sam's name by his father. These debts are substantial, totaling well over \$100,000. John has also taken new student loans to pursue his MSW. Sam also has a Masters degree and the accompanying student loan debt.

Despite these financial burdens, John feels successful and is not too worried about his finances. He and Sam have a plan to pay off these debts over time, and he is significantly better off than he was during his childhood. Although Sam is supporting their family for the most part, John was able to maintain his own residence with roommates before the marriage. He would not have moved to such a low paying job if he didn't have Sam's financial support, but he is capable of supporting himself solely if needed.

John attributes rising out of poverty and homelessness to education. He is in fact the first person in his family to obtain a college degree, as is his husband.

He is no longer speaking with any of his extended family, except, ironically, Chris. Chris struggles with his mental health and is often homeless. John occasionally takes him for a meal or checks up on him, which he views as an act of charity. He does not speak to his father and stepmother or other siblings at all.

After he gets his MSW, he hopes to continue working directly with social work clients with an LGBTQ focus, but for a higher wage.

Eliana

2006-2007

I met Eliana Cruz (pseudonym) as a twenty one year old college sophomore. She identifies as Latina and lesbian. Eliana found out about HMI's after school program through her best friend from grade school, Daniel. He had a friend who was already a participant, and encouraged Eliana to attend as well to meet other LGBTQ students.

Eliana's paternal grandmother raised her for the most part. However, as an infant, her mother was her primary caretaker. Sadly, her care was left to her father because her mother was brutally murdered in front of her in a drug related massacre in New York when Eliana was just 1 year old. 10 people, including her siblings, were killed before Eliana was found by a police officer, pseudonymously called Christine, and released into her father's custody. He immediately sent her to live with his mother, her paternal grandmother.

Eliana's father supported her and her grandmother financially, but he was never around himself. Eliana's grandmother was an alcoholic, and didn't offer her much support emotionally. Eliana was forced to care for herself, and often butted heads with her grandmother. When she was sixteen, she got into a fight with her grandmother and decided to move out.

Still in contact with Christine, she went to live with her. She became very attached to Christine, and did not get along with her husband because she became jealous of him. After living with Christine for a year, Christine asked her to leave due to the problems Eliana caused in the marriage.

Eliana knew she couldn't get along with her grandmother, so she decided to go to live with her father. Since he was the super of the building in which he lived, he gave her own small apartment. He gave her fifty dollars a week for food and necessities, but was never around. At first, though Eliana was basically on her own, her dad would sign necessary papers for school and always made sure to leave her enough money. As time went on, he stopped giving her money. Eliana was forced to rely on her friends to buy her school lunch and fast food after school so she wouldn't starve. Eliana started to fail in school. When her teachers tried to call her father to talk about her grades, he didn't return their calls. Eliana realized she needed to find somewhere else to live where she could have more support.

Already a participant in the after school program, she asked to be placed in a group home for the last six months before she headed off to college. At this point, she had already been accepted to college, so HMI was able to find her a spot at a group home in Brooklyn after she became emancipated from her father. The group home required her to stay in school, get an I.D., get a job, and to open a bank account. She was required to save half her paycheck in the bank

account each pay period to remain compliant with her group home rules. If residents performed all of their chores, they also received a \$500 stipend per month.

Eliana worked as a peer sexual health educator for HMI for one year. After she completed that internship, she worked as a Linked Lives intern for HMI. The internship consisted of AIDS education and shifts at God's Love We Deliver, a food delivery program for those with terminal illnesses. Eliana was able to get through high school in this manner. In 2007, though she had attended SUNY Purchase for two and a half years, she hadn't earned enough credit hours for junior standing. Her advisor and three out of her four current professors told her that she should think about leaving college and pursue something she had more of an aptitude for. At the time she had an on campus job that provided her with a paltry sum. She used this money to buy groceries for her grandmother more often than not. Her grandmother received rent money and little else from her son. Eliana lived with her grandmother over holidays and breaks, but she also acted as her grandmother's caretaker.

Eliana had a hard time paying for what she needs, and often relies on her friends for clothing or other necessities. At 21, she became ineligible to receive the financial and emotional assistance she did in high school. She had thought about working more to support herself and grandmother, but since she is failing all but one of her classes, she didn't think she could handle any more commitments outside of school.

2018

In 2018, I reached out to Eliana again. She is now 35 and still identifies as a lesbian. After five years, Eliana left college without a degree. She worked at many different low wage jobs such as retail and childcare post college, piecing together a living with multiple jobs.

In 2009, her grandmother died, allowing Eliana to take over her rent-controlled apartment and keep the low rent. As her grandmother had been living there for decades, it's well under market value.

Around this time Eliana reconnected with Christine, who helped her process and understand the circumstances surrounding her mother's murder by helping her get therapy. Her father has remained outside of her life, and they are not in contact. Christine helped Eliana from time to time financially, although Eliana was not welcome to live in her home. However, this connection helped Eliana move past the traumatic events of her mother's death.

However, she was still looking for parental figures, and had begged Christine for many years to adopt her. At 31, Christine adopted Eliana. Eliana volunteers for the police force and has a job with the state; she is able to get by. She is not married, though she is dating an unemployed nursing assistant. Her girlfriend lives with her parents. She has an associate's degree.

As Eliana is not able to finish her college degree, she faces difficulty in leveling up her employment opportunities. She has expressed a desire to foster children, but is unable to given her financial circumstances.

Analysis & Conclusion

The unique nature of this research, which allowed me to interview the same subjects after they had launched into adulthood, rendered many interesting conclusions.

Identity Formation

Cultural and technological changes in the last ten years have greatly improved LGBTQ youth's access to information and community for the purpose of identity formation. Youth do not distinguish between online and offline social life as they may have when Internet access was not as common. Thus, it is not useful to create a hard line between these two worlds, but rather understand the intertwined identity development that occurs in the digital space that contributes to inner identity development (Craig & McInroy, 2014, p. 98). Youth are able to use the resources available freely on the internet to develop their sense of their own identity.

Identity is complex and shifting, depending on the space and situation. Recent research regarding intersectionality, or how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society, is a useful approach to understanding experiences of LGBTQ homeless youth. First coined by Kimberle Crenshaw to explore the experiences of black women, intersectionality attempts to encapsulate the shifting landscape of discrimination felt across axes of difference (Crenshaw, 1989). These youth are often discriminated against for multiple reasons. The micro-communities provided by the Internet allow them to understand their combination of identities rather than approaching each separately.

Community

As LGBTQ youth access the Internet, they are able to find others like them more easily than ever before in our history. Rather than having to admit their sexuality and hope the other person is receptive, they can easily find people they know are like them, or share details about their lives with relative anonymity. This likeness was hard to find before the prevalence of the Internet, and this sense of community is important to their sense of identity. The LGBTQ youth with a community have support to help them navigate the treacherous waters of coming out or living on the streets. Even homeless LGBTQ youth have the ability to access the Internet, in communities like Reddit's *r/homeless* and others.

This ability to create a community online, has made it safe and easier to find a community, and lowered the barriers to doing so. This makes it easier to homeless LGBT youth to share resources and coping strategies for their difficulties, which leads to great adaptability and success in providing for themselves.

Youth Social Services

The problem of social services is still very real for homeless LGBTQ youth. Although our culture shows a growing awareness and compassion for issues of gender identity and sexual orientation, discrimination is still widespread and common, as discussed in above.

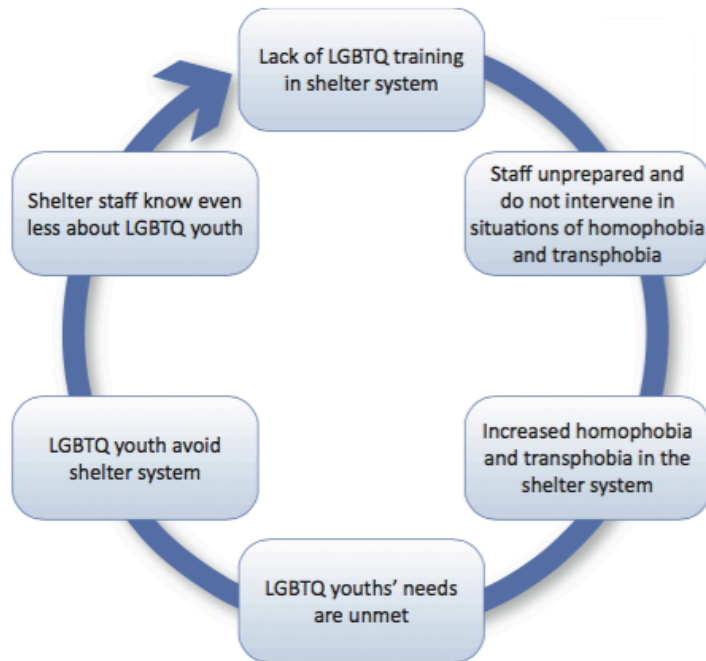


Figure 1. Cycle of Relations Between Shelter Staff and Homeless LGBTQ Youth (Source: Abramovich, 2016)

The figure to the left illustrates the cyclical nature of dysfunction at homeless shelters that serve LGBTQ youth (Abramovich, 2016, p. 89). Staff members are not adequately trained and do not intervene during incidents of transphobia and homophobia, which increases the prevalence of

incidents. John made reference to several of these incidents during his time in the church shelter, ultimately causing him to seek other shelter but being forced to endure temporarily as he had nowhere else to go. Often, LGBTQ youth's needs are not met, so they avoid the shelter system, leading to even less understanding by shelter staff.

Best practices in shelters can include a number of policy and action-oriented items. Staff training and hiring practices must include LGBTQ awareness and sympathy screening (Keuroghlian et al., 2014, p. 6). In addition, creating a culture of respect is key.

Youth programs can take similar measures to provide better services for LGBTQ youth. This includes posting and adhering to non-discrimination policies, informing youth of LGBTQ programs locally, and supporting access to mental and physical health programs.

Particularly important are peer educators for these social services. These youth have been pushed away by their parents and do not have innate trust for adults. Other youth providing social proof of the organization's value to them will help more LGBTQ youth feel welcomed into these programs and attempt to access them.

That being said, the most important factor for youth to make use of these programs is to know about them. In crisis, with few resources, these LGBTQ youth do not know where to get help or how to ask for it. This must change so that these services can be accessed when they are most needed. Eliana and John both were able to participate in LGBT-specific programs solely because of happenstance word of mouth. They easily could have not heard about these programs and likely would have never been able to make it to college. Pure luck is not a scalable strategy to ensure those most in need can make use of the programs, and we must expand the awareness of these resources within the homeless youth community. Perhaps the growing use of the Internet to discuss their issues can also serve as a solution for awareness of the resources available.

LGBTQ Youth and Poverty

Through the life histories gathered, I was able to see how much of a lifelong impact youth homelessness has on the ability to achieve significant financial success. It is a struggle for this population to finish high school while homeless, without a permanent address. They are struggling to survive and provide for themselves, and therefore have limited time to devote to their studies. This issue leads to difficulty accessing and completing a college education.

I saw this very clearly with Eliana, who struggled to maintain her studies while attempting to provide for herself and her grandmother, eventually leading to her being forced to choose survival over completing her education. Her traumatic past also clearly weighed heavily on her ability to make a better life for herself. She struggles with anger, depression, and feelings of worthlessness. These mental health struggles directly led to her being convinced she was literally not able to complete her degree, which in turn prevented her from accessing higher paying employment and the subsequent opportunities that would normally follow. The therapy she completed in her early thirties was likely a helpful factor in her current stable employment, as it helped her process her prior trauma. Therapy allowed her the self-confidence to believe she was capable of holding down a long term job and achieve that goal.

Students with more support tend to fare better, and these LGBTQ students often have none. Those that are able to complete their degrees continue to have difficulty achieving higher levels of income in adulthood, preventing them from accessing millions of dollars over their lifetimes. Without high salaries, they are prevented from homeownership, car ownership or other significant assets. Those with dreams of children feel unable to provide for potential children, or even afford their conception.

John and Eliana both alluded to their desire for children, and both stated that financial instability prevented them from being able to pursue that. It is also true that LGBTQ people have higher financial burdens to have children, depending on either costly fertility services or expensive legal processes. However, as both are now in their mid-thirties, they have waning time to procure more financial stability in order to achieve that goal. I believe that their financial difficulties in their youth have prevented them from achieving their full financial potential for their lifetimes.

In Eliana's case, she was unable to complete her education, which reduced her opportunities for high paying work. In John's case, despite his college education, his need to provide for himself delayed the start of his true career in social work by many years while he worked in retail, effectively stalled out on his career path. When he did finally make the transition, he started at the low end of the pay scale rather than gradually accumulating significant pay raises throughout his early career as many of his peers did

Even the few LGBTQ youth who do access the specific social service resources available to them, which is not much of the eligible population, still face significant difficulties in achieving the same degree of financial stability as most of their heterosexual, non-homeless

peers. However, those that have accessed these services are still significantly more financially stable than those that had never accessed them.

The effects of youth poverty and homelessness, when combined with the stigma facing LGBT people, significantly compound over time. This population faces financial instability that they never catch up from, falling farther behind their non-stigmatized peers as time goes on. We must continue to strive to provide more appropriate services for homeless LGBTQ youth that they feel comfortable accessing and which meets their unique needs.

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