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Spring 2021

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FYH 102

20 April 2021

Queer Even in Safe Spaces: Homelessness, Shelter Failures, and the Queer Community

Privileged groups consistently expect marginalized group identities to provide comfort, be it in the way the members actually showcase their identities, the work they do for society, or their general respect for the status quo. The queer community, specifically, has long been subject to prejudice and violence, and while tolerance is slowly increasing in the United States, the present day is no exception. Queer folks in the US are even much more likely to be homeless or in domestic violence situations than their heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, once in vulnerable housing situations, queer folks are dangerously less likely to receive the necessary aid to achieve safety and regain their lives. Public perceptions of homeless people in general are nowhere near positive, from the supposed initial causes of homelessness to the length of time a person spends without secure housing. Furthermore, queer folks face risks of becoming homeless which those outside of the LGBTQ+ community may not encounter. There are gaps in the financial and legal systems, as well as social vulnerabilities like racial prejudice, heteronormativity, and transphobia which further endanger the queer community, especially in vulnerable situations. Each risk for these queer folks comes as a result of intolerance and negative public perception. Morphing these perceptions into education and sympathy will be the only solution. Moreover, the very notion that a person must fit their identity into something the general public feels comfortable with in order to deserve safety, comfort, and prosperity must be dissolved.

Section I: Overview

Homelessness in the United States has long been a widespread issue. Along with it, the judgement of homeless people has persisted as an underlying attitude among a majority of citizens. Folks are willing to make donations through local organizations like churches, but most maintain an out of sight, out of mind philosophy. Robert Agans and Guangya Liu surveyed Los Angeles residents in 2015 to gauge general public perceptions of homelessness, both whether they are mostly sympathetic or unsympathetic as well as which struggles people assume end in homelessness. In general, 91% of those surveyed indicated that they thought drugs or alcohol addictions are a leading cause of homelessness (Agans and Liu 6). 62% of respondents indicated that they thought laziness was a main contributor to homelessness; for the general population, this is expected to be between 57 and 66% (6).

Mental health was the second most likely cause of homelessness according to the respondents. Interestingly, they found that “people with a high school education or less are 58% more likely to be sympathetic toward the homeless than individuals with some level of college” (7). This could indicate a lack of empathy among folks who consider themselves further from the risk of homelessness. In general, public attitudes toward the homeless are not positive, and layers of marginalization like being queer or a person of color only add to the negative perception. However, those of us who are not at risk of a vulnerable housing situation cannot feel entitled to judgement or expect those who are to achieve a certain standard before we deem them worthy of help, comfort, or general well-being. It is that very attitude that must change, in regard not only to homeless people but also to other marginalized groups like the queer community.

The specific data on exactly how many LGBTQ+ people are in vulnerable housing situations is difficult to grasp for various reasons, but there is no doubt that homelessness among queer populations is a crisis. First, a lack of organization is a partial cause of the depth of the issue. Many experts, including two separate research teams at the UCLA Williams Institute, agree that the government and other organizations primarily responsible for ending the housing crisis have outlined no clear definitions or goals thus far in order to take action. With the lack of regard from the government for queer folks in general, it only becomes more difficult to identify exactly how large the matter truly is. One of the aforementioned research teams from UCLA, led by Adam Romero, Shoshana Goldberg, and Luis Vasquez published a report on LGBT Housing in April 2020 and encountered this very issue:

> Estimating the number of people who are homeless (including both those who are sheltered and unsheltered) or unstably housed—and what proportion of them are LGBT—is challenging for a number of reasons, including the difficulty of collecting data from people who may be living in temporary bridge housing, cars, friends' couches, or on the street. Yet, a variety of studies have shown that LGBT youth and adults are overrepresented among those with unstable housing or who are homeless. (14)

Though research is more accessible than in previous decades, obstacles clearly still occur and will continue to occur without major redirections put in place.

Thankfully, due to the tireless work of researchers like those above, we are lucky to have data available. Another UCLA research team led by Senior Scholar of Public Policy Bianca D.M. Wilson published a brief on LGBTQ+ homelessness in the United States as of May 2020 entitled *Homelessness Among LGBT Adults in the US*. In this brief, the team revealed solid data making a case for the vastness of the situation. They found that 6.2% of the general population

experienced homelessness at some point in their lifetime, but 16.9% of LGBTQ+ experienced homelessness at some point in their lifetime (Wilson et al). In addition, “Among [queer folks] who experienced homelessness, the majority (71%) experienced it as an adult (age 18 years or older), 20% experienced homelessness before the age of 18, and 9% reported homelessness experiences in both youth and adulthood” (Wilson et al). The rate of queer youth being kicked out of homes has been alarmingly high for decades. The tragic truth is that queer folks in America experience higher rates of homelessness in all its various forms, and this is only the data researchers have been able to gather thus far. It is not without reason to assume that even more vulnerable populations within the queer community are not accounted for in the available data. Even so, understanding at least this data provides a starting point.

Not only is the queer community at a higher risk of homelessness, but they are also at a higher risk of intimate partner violence. Furthermore, those who do end up homeless because of discrimination, domestic violence, or other factors are far more likely to be harmed or killed without a decent place to go. According to the press release of the UCLA Williams Institute’s research on the victimization of queer folks published in the journal *Science Advances*, “LGBT people are about 6 times more likely to experience violence by someone who is well known to them and about 2.5 times more likely to undergo it at the hands of a stranger, compared to non-LGBT people” (Flores et al). In general the Williams Institute found that queer folks are four times more likely to “experience violent victimization” than non-queer folks (Flores et al). This includes both within and outside of relationships, and not just romantic relationships; violence against queer folks and especially youth from within their own families is stunningly common.

The research also discovered that “about half of all victimizations are not reported to police,” setting queer folks even further behind on the path to justice (Flores et al). Even when police are involved, there is a faulty history between the queer community and police officers as evidenced by incidents like at Stonewall Inn in 1969, when police raided a gay bar unprompted and sparked uprising. With queer folks at such high risk of violence and housing vulnerability in many forms, there must be spaces for these people to utilize and exercise their basic human right to safety. The stigma surrounding not only the queer community but also survivors of intimate partner violence is a great harm, but what makes it dangerous and even deadly is the expectation many outside of the queer community, citizens and public service professionals alike, hold that they should feel comfortable with a person’s identity before considering them as a human being deserving of safety and comfort, much less happiness.

Section II: Systemic Failures

With this understanding in place, it is now crucial to examine the systems which cause this high risk of homelessness among queer populations. A variety of factors, including financial vulnerability, legal gaps, racial prejudice, heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia contribute to the overall vulnerability of queer people, especially youth, of ending up homeless in some regard for any span of time; the problem only becomes more dangerous as layers of privilege are stripped away. However, the threat of homelessness even for queer adults in otherwise comfortable positions in life looms large. In the April 2020 report by Romero and his fellow researchers, one aspect of housing vulnerability examined was the financial vulnerability that comes with being a queer person in the United States. It begins with the percentage of renters versus homeowners in heterosexual adults compared with queer adults. “According to

representative data from 35 states, nearly half (49.8%) of LGBT adults own their homes, compared to 70.1% of non-LGBT adults [in 2019]" (Romero et al 11-12). And as the report clarified, these trends reflect those of recent years, and all of this data was from before the COVID-19 pandemic truly took hold. Since the collection of this data, increases in wealth disparity and housing vulnerability have no doubt had a disproportionately negative impact on the queer community.

Romero and the others go on to identify that mistreatment from lenders and renters alike is often the reason for queer folks being less likely to own or even consistently rent their living spaces, though they may not even recognize that discrimination took place. Futhermore, "people who do not know or sense that bias is afoot are unlikely to seek redress under any anti-discrimination laws that might be available" (21). On the other hand, the report observes that those who actually are aware of the discrimination against queer folks in the housing market most often feel deterred from even attempting to live in the spaces they qualify for as a preemptive measure of avoiding the unjust rejection. Finally, the researchers make clear that the day-to-day discrimination experienced by queer folks "may also play a role in poverty risk and economic vulnerability more broadly. For example, being fired from a job or evicted from housing can drive people into or deepen poverty, and wage discrimination suppresses earnings" (11). Clearly, even queer folks in relatively stable positions face housing vulnerability as a result of constant discrimination. In this case it is the renters and lenders who feel entitled to comfort with a person's identity before they feel obliged to properly do their job, which is unacceptable. There is no denying that queer folks have the same right to live in houses of their choosing as their heterosexual counterparts and those in charge of housing need to accept this as fact, whether they claim to understand or feel familiar with the queer community or not; it is not a

queer person's responsibility to comfort those who do not understand it is the job of those who do not understand to not expect that comfort and recognize them as a human being anyway.

Ideally, there would be legal protections in place to prevent this discrimination from occurring, but those protections are sadly either missing or, in many cases, simply not enough. The research team led by Romero included information on this alongside the above information regarding financial vulnerability. Neither the federal Fair Housing Act nor the Equal Credit Opportunity Act include specific language protecting against discrimination based on sexual orientation. But, according to the Williams Institute research, "they do prohibit sex discrimination and many courts have concluded anti-LGBT discrimination is a form of sex discrimination under these and similar statutes" (4). The status quo so far appears to be to include discrimination against queer folks, but without the specific protective language in place it surely does not go far enough. Similarly, Romero writes on the same page, "Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination in programs and activities receiving federal funding, does not protect against sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity discrimination" (4). Without the proper language in place, the legal system is another instance of failure to protect the queer community of all ages from vulnerability to homelessness. In addition, workers within the legal system need to understand that queer folks are deserving of defense and justice in the exact same way as those who are not queer, no matter their individual views on the queer community. Regardless, a queer person's identity should have no effect on their work and does not need to make them comfortable in the first place.

While these systemic failures impact every queer person who is homeless in some capacity for any reason, there is yet another group within the queer community even more vulnerable to endangerment when it comes to their living situation. Those impacted by domestic

violence, or intimate partner violence (IPV), are in urgent need of safe living spaces with proper accommodations. Surviving IPV provides no guarantee of safety outside of the situation, especially not for feminine-identifying people, queer or otherwise, who have nowhere else to go. For this reason, women-based shelters are available in many locations for survivors of intimate partner violence. Rishita Apsani of the California Law Review's brilliant 2018 work on women's shelters gives a great introduction:

> IPV shelters are more than just temporary housing spaces. The typical shelter allows women to stay for thirty to sixty days, conceals their locations from abusive partners, and provides counselling and referrals that respond to women's help-seeking behaviors. Most shelters offer services that include accompanying a survivor to a hospital, helping her find a new apartment, applying for welfare, or getting a civil protection order. (Apsani)

There is no denying that these shelters and the generous people who provide them do an incredible job supporting women in crisis situations and guiding them to safer paths in life. However, in order to respect these shelters and allow them to function most effectively it is crucial to address the concerns that still exist within their operations, including the groups they leave out.

With the systemic failures already discussed, it unfortunately comes as no surprise that these types of shelters frequently neglect many underprivileged populations. These shelters also not only operate under the legal systems but also under the social structures in place which fail these communities in their own regards. First and foremost, even for cisgender women, racial prejudice stands in the way of survivors finding the help they need. Apsani discusses at length the mistreatment of women of color in her 2018 publication on transgender women in these IPV women's shelters. She demonstrates how Black women, cisgender or otherwise, are frequently

asked to leave for behavior deemed "violent" like speaking loudly within the shelters. Several experts have previously concluded that people of color, especially those with darker skin and more typical Black features, are seen with far less sympathy than white folks and especially white women, who are seen as more delicate, vulnerable, and deserving of help. This disparity shows up in the general public as well as in many fields in which patients seek help from professionals, like in medical and psychological fields or in IPV shelters.

Finally, Apsani asserts that the protective nature of the shelters that makes them safe hiding spaces is isolating for women of color who need access to their cultural community in order to truly feel safe. The shelters are intentionally difficult to access so that outside people who may be dangerous cannot interfere with the survivors getting help. However, many survivors who are not comfortable speaking English or are otherwise dependent on the culture they belong to, struggle with remaining in the shelters long enough to seek help and find themselves back in the dangerous relationship situation out of ease. These shelters, as helpful as they aim to be and as necessary as they are in our world, are not adequately prepared to serve women of color.

Racial minorities are not the only vulnerable group underserved by the majority of IPV women's shelters. Due to a few problematic themes developed from second-wave feminism like heteronormativity and transphobia, any individual who does not fall strictly into the traditional, expected role of a domestic violence survivor faces barriers to accessing the help they need. The second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s through the 1980s pushed domestic violence into the public eye; a vital move which made a myriad of improvements in the lives of IPV survivors. However, it also created a view of domestic violence as a heterosexual issue stemming from the overmasculinization of men and the oversubordination of women, which to this day is the most

widely accepted narrative. While not entirely inaccurate for many people, this idea leaves little room for survivors of IPV who do not fit in these specific gender roles or who are not in strictly heterosexual relationships at all. Again, Apsani explains it best:

> The sparse research addressing IPV within the LGBT community complicates the simplistic male-perpetrator and female-victim dyad that informs second wave feminist organizing. Yet the male-abuser and female-victim narrative remains so strong that it sometimes blinds even trained advocates to signs of LGBT IPV. For example, a lesbian survivor claimed that she struggled to realize she was in a violent relationship because she adopted the societal belief that women are passive and nonviolent—a perception that her training at a domestic violence shelter only reinforced during. Similarly, gay men experiencing abuse may feel pressured to paint their partner in hyper-masculine terms to have their domestic violence claims taken seriously. (Apsani)

Raelene Carlson of St. Catherine's University made a similar statement in her assessment of shelter responses to queer survivors, writing in 2016, "Individuals in same-sex relationships may not even realize that what they are experiencing is IPV, making them much less likely to reach out for help" (Carlson 8-9). The responsibility falls on the experts to understand these dynamics and be prepared to educate and assist all kinds of people in all forms of relationships, not on queer folks to be hyperaware of each aspect of their relationship in a way that people in heteronormative relationships do not have to do.

The heteronormative view on relationships in which there is always one man and one woman, or at the very least one masculine figure and one female figure, disregards entire groups of identities. Apsani and Carlson, among others, have commented on the exclusion of relationships between two people of the same gender or otherwise of different genders from just

male and female, like a relationship in which one or more people are gender nonconforming in some way. Additionally, the lines are also blurred in relationships where the members do not identify with the social role assigned to their identified gender, or even in relationships where there are more than two people involved. In essence, second-wave feminism accomplished great things by bringing attention to IPV survivors, but failed in regards to creating an inclusive view of what IPV can and does look like. Professionals seeking to help survivors of these situations must not look for the situations they expect to see based on their own understanding of normalcy and acceptable relationships. Rather, they must be prepared for all forms of relationships in order to accurately do their job. In the same vein, survivors should never be concerned with fitting their story into any expectation, especially not one of heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity is not the only system at play in making hostile situations out of women's shelters. The exclusion of transgender and gender nonconforming people consistently reigns even within activism-based spaces, and these shelters are no exception. Apsani writes:

> Domestic violence shelters are often marked 'women-only' with the goal of creating spaces for female empowerment, wherein women learn feminist principles of liberation and find a 'sisterhood' of support by forging healthy female relationships. However, as a result, shelters frequently deny transgender women access because staff perceive them to be a threat to survivor comfort and to be disruptive to shelters' female-empowerment model. (Apsani)

It is no secret that transgender individuals are disregarded or worse by society more often than not. Many transgender individuals have stated they would be better off remaining in an abusive relationship than subjecting themselves to the conditions they would endure within shelters; this is a clear failure on the part of the shelters to achieve their purpose.

Unfortunately, those in charge of the shelters do genuinely believe they have reason to keep the shelters as cisgender-only spaces, and according to Apsani, they "often [cite] genuine concerns for survivor comfort and safety" (Apsani). This includes concerns that some groups of cisgender women (like women of color and women who are not strictly heterosexual) still have not had their needs fully addressed, as well as that trans women have been socialized as men for long enough that they "exercise male privilege", and even that "the admission of transgender women will inevitably lead to the inclusion of men who will simply claim that they are 'female in a man's body' and use that justification to stalk and harm the survivor" (Apsani). However, given the degree that society condemns and endangers trans people as well as how little the general public truly understands about the construction of gender identity, there is essentially no chance that a person would pretend to be transgender just to accomplish some goal or task, especially not a violent one and especially not in a safe space like these shelters. Claims like this and the people who promote them are not protecting cisgender women at all but instead merely further endangering our transgender and gender nonconforming peers. Transphobia and prejudice against gender nonconforming folks, alongside heternormativity, vastly decrease IPV shelters' abilities to create safe, welcoming environments ready to aid those in need. To fix this, the idea that the existence of queer people, especially trans people, must be morphed into something palatable for everyone else in the shelter and in the world must be eradicated.

Section III: Within Shelters

Raelene Carlson's 2016 research for St. Catherine's University provides a small but informative glimpse into the actual attitudes of shelter staff regarding the queer community. Her study, *Shelter Response to Intimate Partner Violence in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and*

Transgender Community, demonstrates the barriers from the perspective of within the shelters through a series of interviews with three Minnesota-based supervisors. She addresses that queer folks are far more likely to be barred from accessing the necessary resources, just as already demonstrated by other experts like Romero, Wilson, and Apsani, and aims to uncover a potential rationale from the staff themselves. The three staff members from various area shelters were interviewed using the Barriers Model developed by Nancy Grigsby and Brenda Hartman, which analyzes environmental opportunities, social expectations, psychological consequences of abuse, and childhood history of neglect and their overall effects on "[preventing] the client from achieving safety" within shelters (Carlson 17). These shelters claim to "serve all clients regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity" (27). Many shelters do in fact welcome transgender women and gender nonconforming people now, but there are still few IPV shelters available for men and masculine-presenting people and there are still barriers for all queer folks in any shelters.

The representative staff members were honest in admitting that the shelters have not always done what they could to include all who need help, but all three claimed they were taking some measures to improve the inclusion and accessibility of their shelters. Each representative claimed they were taking steps to use more gender-neutral language, partner with local LGBTQ+ organizations, develop more diverse groups of staff, and include some form of LGBT training. They seemed optimistic for the future and, at the very least, prepared to begin changing their own attitudes and those of their staff. Brown and Groscup, previous researchers on crisis shelters and the queer community cited by Carlson, proved in a 2008 study that mental health professionals do, in fact, often have "negative attitudes" toward those in the queer community (12). However, if these shelters and those like them around the country are truly willing to

rearrange systems and include the queer community in their work, and continuously put the steps in place to do so, we will be closer to becoming a country in which all people have equal access to living comfortably and safely.

Section IV: Conclusion

Solutions do exist, and many have already been theorized. On the legal side, a simple solution entails adding language to existing or new legislation via amendments to ensure that sexual orientation is included in discrimination protection, and that transgender and gender nonconforming folks are included in protections against discrimination based on sex or gender. However, this added language must come with the understanding that a person deserves protection for their gender identity as well as their sexual orientation through any and all fluctuations, whether they fit into a neat box that makes sense to those around them or not. Shelters themselves must also make further efforts to encourage welcoming and safety within their walls for members of the queer community. Lisa Mottet and John M. Ohle partnered with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute as well as the National Coalition for the Homeless in 2003 to outline extensive measures for this very goal ("Transitioning Our Shelters"). Finally, shelters may choose not to require clients to disclose their gender identities or sexual orientations; however, "If IPV organizations do not have an accurate sense of how many LGBT clients they serve, these organizations are not going to be able to persuade or articulate to potential donors and funding sources the importance and need of LGBT-specific IPV services" (Carlson 37). Additionally, asking members of the queer community to hide their identities addresses a symptom, but not the overarching problem, which is that queer folks feel unsafe as a result of their very existence.

It becomes increasingly obvious as more solutions appear that the issue at the core of this argument is the way of thinking that undermines each previous effort. First, public attitudes toward homelessness in general are rarely positive. Each individual, especially those who do not consider themselves at risk of homelessness and/or do not personally know anyone at risk, must make conscious efforts to examine the issue of homelessness in our country and around the world and willingly increase not only sympathy but empathy. Second, heteronormativity and transphobia continue to persist in nearly every aspect of decision making thus far. The new widely understood philosophy must be inclusive of various romantic and sexual orientations as well as the full range of gender identities. In each solution presented, a change in public perception is required— the harsh manner in which our country considers this group of people is, in fact, the crux of the issue. Only strong efforts to increase tolerance of both the homeless populations and the queer community will produce the necessary change. These efforts will only come with individual willingness and persistence. The question is not whether or not a queer person's identity makes another individual comfortable, but why the general public feels entitled to comfort with a person's identity before they consider this person worthy of a good quality of life.

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