Understanding How Policy and Culture Create Oppressive Conditions for LGBTQ2S Youth in the Shelter System

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the experiences that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and two-spirit (LGBTQ2S) homeless youth have in shelters and the disjunctures that occur for this population in Toronto's shelter system. The attitudes and behaviors of shelter workers and management toward LGBTQ2S youth were also explored. A critical action research approach, informed by critical ethnography and institutional ethnography was employed. Thirty-three people participated in this study in the Greater Toronto Area. The study triangulated data from interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. The systemic enactment of homophobia, transphobia, and hegemonic masculinity are often normalized in shelters and create significant barriers to safe, accessible, and supportive services for LGBTQ2S youth. Excessive bureaucratic regulation and the lack of necessary bureaucratic regulation in highly significant areas play a key role in creating the disjunctures that occur for LGBTQ2S youth in shelters.

There has been extensive research in the area of youth homelessness both in Canada and internationally. Although issues specific to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and two-spirit (LGBTQ2S) youth are frequently cited; they are rarely the focus in Canadian research. National measurements on LGBTQ2S youth homelessness in Canada are often based on older data. For example, one Canadian study 16 years ago estimated that 25%–40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ2S (Josephson & Wright, 2000). Large-scale data collection regarding LGBTQ2S youth homelessness remains limited, and shelters and point-in-time counts rarely collect data on youths' gender or sexual identities, making it difficult to measure the scale of this population of young people across Canada. There are serious hazards of relying on old data, such as an underestimate of the real prevalence of the issue, and without an accurate count it is difficult to confirm crucial characteristics of the population, to secure necessary increases in funding, or to

build a policy case for the delivery of more targeted services. This gap in data inevitably impairs service delivery.

It is well documented that the main cause of youth homelessness, regardless of gender or sexual identity, is family conflict (Caputo, Weiler, & Anderson, 1996; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Karabanow, 2004). Identity-based family rejection resulting from a young person coming out is one of the most frequently cited precipitators of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Price, Wheeler, Shelton, & Maury, 2016; Ray, 2006). Compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers, LGBTQ2S youth face an increased risk of homelessness and experience homelessness for longer periods (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015; Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013). Family conflict and rejection, inadequate social services, and discrimination in housing, employment, and education make it difficult for LGBTQ2S youth to secure safe and affirming places to live.

As a consequence of family rejection, social stigma, and pervasive homophobia and transphobia, LGBTQ2S youth experience health disparities, including vulnerability to physical and sexual exploitation, mental health difficulties, substance use, and suicide (Cray et al., 2013; Durso & Gates, 2012; Ray, 2006; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). Even though shelters and support services are meant to provide support and safety to all young people, LGBTQ2S youth often report feeling safer on the streets than in shelters, due to homophobic and transphobic discrimination and violence (Abramovich, 2013; Denomme-Welch, Pyne, & Scanlon, 2008; Durso & Gates, 2012; Ray, 2006). Transgender youth, especially young transgender women of color, are among the most discriminated against groups in the shelter system, often dealing simultaneously with transphobia, homophobia, and racism (Price et al., 2016; Quintana, Rosenthal, & Krehely, 2010; Sakamoto et al., 2010). Transgender women frequently experience severe marginalization and discrimination in the shelter system and on the streets, based on their gender and sexual identity and race, class, and age (Sakamoto et al., 2010). Transgender men have also described shelters as unsafe and have reported feeling unwelcome in men's and women's shelters, due to ignorant staff and residents and an absence of policies that include and protect trans people (Denomme-Welch et al., 2008).

Shelters and housing programs are typically divided by male and female floors and bathrooms and are designed primarily to accommodate cisgender residents. This makes it especially difficult for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals to access services; it also increases the risk for gender discrimination and gender violence to occur within these spaces (Hussey, 2015). Shelter staffs tend to receive minimal transgender competency training, resulting in a lack of understanding and awareness and, in some cases, willful ignorance. Due to the lack of training and awareness regarding transgender identities, staff may not have an understanding of the importance of asking youth what pronoun and

name they prefer, or which floor they would feel safest. A high proportion of transgender and gender non-conforming youth report being denied access to shelters because of their gender identity (Grant et al., 2011; Hussey, 2015).

Although LGBTQ2S youth homelessness has been acknowledged as an emergent crisis for over two decades (O'Brien, Travers, & Bell, 1993), this issue has been neglected and inadequately addressed for years. In Canada, there is a tendency to rely on research from the United States with regard to this issue. Key decision makers across Canada have not responded appropriately to the needs of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness, which is purportedly due to the lack of evidence-based research. Currently, there are few specialized housing programs and no emergency shelters designed to meet the needs of this population in Canada.

This study aimed to address the gap in research by employing a critical action research approach to explore the experiences of LGBTQ2S homeless youth in shelters and the disjunctures that occur for this population in the shelter system. A disjuncture can be described as people having different experiences of the same event, and a disconnect between what is actually happening versus what is supposed to be happening (Campbell& Gregor, 2008). Exploring disjunctures revealed not only why things were happening but also how things were happening. Only by exploring how are we able to enable change (Campbell& Gregor, 2008). Specifically, this research asked: (1) What disjunctures occur for LGBTQ2S youth in the shelter system; and (2) How do those disjunctures transpire? In addition to answering the research questions, a major goal of this study was to improve the condition of shelters, the policies that rule the shelter system, and people's understanding of these issues and, of course, to involve the participants, mainly the youth participants, who were at the core of this study.

Methods

To explore the experiences of LGBTQ2S homeless and street-involved youth in shelters, the study employed a critical action research (Carson, 1990) approach, informed by elements of critical ethnography (Thomas, 1993) and institutional ethnography (DeVault & McCoy, 2006). Using a qualitative design, data from interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis were triangulated as a way to better understand the human condition from varied perspectives and helped ensure rigor and trustworthiness (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamonth, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001; Richards, 2005; Robson, 2011). All the data was collected in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), with the exception of one focus group and interview, which were conducted in a shelter in close proximity to the GTA.

Employing a critical action research approach helped break down some of the power differentials that inherently exist in research with marginalized

populations and promoted empowerment and social justice. Critical action research can be described as combining critical theory with the action research paradigm (Given, 2008). It is well suited for research that intends to create social change, and the outcomes are both practical and theoretical (Given, 2008). Critical action research is intended to empower participants and researchers through the exploration and recognition of power differentials and collaborative efforts to create knowledge and solve institutional problems (Given, 2008). Considerable emphasis is placed on acknowledging nonacademic and local knowledge of participants and recognizing that people are the experts of their own experiences and providing participants with the opportunity to share their lived experience leads to knowledge production (Given, 2008).

Ethical approval was obtained from a university research ethics board.

Participants

A total of 33 people participated in this research study. Participants included (1) LGBTQ2S youth (*n* = 11) and (2) adults who work in the shelter system, including frontline shelter staff (*n* = 14) and individuals in management positions (executive directors, shelter workshop facilitators, and City of Toronto management; *n* = 8).

(1) *LGBTQ2S youth.* The criteria for youth participants were: youth who identify as LGBTQ2S, between the ages of 16 and 29 years, street-involved or homeless in Toronto. The young people that participated in this study were between the ages of 21 and 29, with the average age being 25 years old. Participants were recruited from programs for street-involved and homeless youth between 16 and 29 years old. The age range for youth in studies on youth homelessness is predominantly categorized as 16–26 years of age, and the average age of youth in a number of studies on youth homelessness in Toronto is 19–21 years old (Gaetz, 2004; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Raising the Roof, 2009). This may suggest something about the LGBTQ2S homeless youth cohort in Toronto, or that teenaged youth are less likely to frequent the programs and services that the youth participants were recruited from.

Recruitment posters were initially placed at various youth programs as an attempt to recruit participants, including Supporting Our Youth (SOY) at the Sherbourne Health Centre in Toronto, which offers population-based programming for LGBTQ2S youth throughout the week, such as the Monday night drop-in for street-involved and homeless youth; and BQY-Black Queer Youth, which is a program for Black queer youth to meet, socialize, and participate in workshops. Additional programs included SKETCH (a community arts program for street-involved youth); Native Youth Sexual Health Network (an organization that focuses

on and advocates for culturally safe sexuality and reproductive health services for Indigenous youth); and Queer Asian Youth (a program that focuses on East and Southeast Asian LGBTQ2S youth). Recruiting youth exclusively through posters was not enough to ensure a robust and diverse group, which is what led the principal investigator to attend the youth programs and to meet potential participants in person and share key information about the study.

Snowball sampling and purposive sampling were administered, due to difficulty recruiting LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness. Youth participants were also asked to refer a friend; however, the most successful recruitment method involved attending youth programs in person. Maximum variation was used to ensure diversity among participants. Youth were recruited through various shelters and population-based support services for homeless youth via posters, and the researcher attended several youth homelessness programs. Detailed information regarding youth participant demographics can be found in Appendix A.

(2) *Adults who work in the shelter system*. The criteria for frontline shelter staff were: non-managerial frontline shelter staff. Additionally, the following individuals were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews: the executive director of each shelter that participated, the workshop facilitator of each workshop that was observed, and two managers working in the area of shelter training and shelter complaints. Maximum variation and opportunistic sampling were used to ensure participants had a diverse range of anti-oppression training experiences, comfort levels in dealing with situations of homophobia and transphobia in the shelter system, and number of years of shelter work experience.

Data collection

Data collection involved:

  (i) Semistructured interviews with LBGTQ2S youth (1 hour) to explore pathways into homelessness, the daily experiences of LGBTQ2S homeless youth on the streets and in shelters, access and barriers to support services and shelters, and occurrences of homophobia and transphobia in shelters.
 (ii) Semistructured interviews with adults working in the shelter system (1 hour) to provide in-depth data regarding the rules and policies in the shelter system, staff training, formal complaints process, intake process, and occurrences of homophobia and transphobia. Eight one-on-one interviews were conducted with executive directors, shelter training facilitators, and City of Toronto shelter operations management.

(iii) Three focus groups with 3–8 frontline shelter staff were conducted (2 hours) to explore staff attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions with regard to gender and sexual diversity and LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness and training and levels of preparedness in dealing with situations of homophobia and transphobia.

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim to ensure and maximize transcription quality and to avoid any error or miscommunication (Poland, 1995).

(iv) *Observations*. Both formal and informal observations were conducted. Three training workshops were formally observed to gain an understanding of the training experiences shared by staff during focus groups and to learn more about staff training curriculum and content. This observational stage allowed the researcher to participate directly in the participant setting, revealing additional cultural information about shelter staff.

The informal observations were related to the researcher writing reflections after each focus group and interview, which included observations of participant body language, certain themes that arose during interviews, and new questions that emerged, as well as the physical space of the shelters (e.g., where staff spaces were set up in relation to resident areas, and whether washrooms were gendered and where they were located) and the décor in shelters, including, posters on the walls and types of fliers available to residents.

(v) *Documents*. A key institutional document examined for this study included the Toronto Shelter Standards created by the City of Toronto. Investigating this document provided the ability to reach beyond the local experiences described by participants and explore how the translocal social relations (e.g., bureaucracy, management) coordinate and control the local actions of individuals and in turn create the problems in question.

The grounded theory method of saturation was used as an approach to data collection, which was completed once saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data analysis

An inductive thematic approach was employed to analyze the qualitative data in this study. The data analysis was an iterative process that involved examining major emergent themes for categories and subcategories (Richards, 2005). The analysis generated major themes and meanings that were directly connected with the aims of the study.

The research team began engaging with the data early on by keeping track of participant and interview observations and the main themes that emerged each time data were collected. Interview and focus group transcripts were read numerous times, and preliminary themes were kept track of prior to formally analyzing the data. The analysis generated major themes and meanings that were directly connected with the aims of the study. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim to ensure and maximize transcription quality and to avoid any error or miscommunication (Poland, 1995).

Results

The data indicated that the systemic enactment of homophobia, transphobia, and hegemonic masculinity are rampant and normalized in shelters and create significant barriers to safe, accessible, and supportive services for LGBTQ2S youth. The data also suggested that both excessive bureaucratic regulation and the lack of necessary bureaucratic regulation in highly significant areas play a key role in creating the disjunctures that occur for LGBTQ2S youth in Toronto's shelter system. The results are categorized in the following two major themes: homophobia and transphobia in the shelter system; and inadequate, invasive, and otherwise problematic rules.

The first theme focuses on the culture of the shelter system, the everyday experiences of LGBTQ2S youth in shelters, and the disjunctures that occur for queer and trans youth in the shelter system. The findings move from the standpoint of LGBTQ2S homeless youth to a more conceptual problematic that accounts for how institutional relations organize and rule the everyday experiences of this population of young people.

Homophobia and transphobia in the shelter system

Normalization of homophobia and transphobia

Almost all LGBTQ people going into shelters have a fear of them, because it is not a matter of if it is dangerous, but just how dangerous it will be. It is horrible to live in that fear every day. (Mouse, 22 years old)

The data revealed that the culture of the shelter system is an overall atmosphere of normalized oppression. For example, daily verbal assaults, rules that discriminate against LGBTQ2S youth, incidents of physical violence, and staff not receiving any basic LGBTQ2S training are considered culturally acceptable. The normalization of oppression in the shelter system makes it difficult for shelter staff to recognize when homophobia and transphobia occur, leading them to believe that they constitute a ploy used by LGBTQ2S youth as an excuse or way to protect themselves during a fight or argument:

I've seen something here where they started an altercation but it wasn't because he's a gay or he's a different orientation where they are fighting with each other. This is a way to protect themselves, 'because I'm gay he's attacking me.' It's not true in any cases, no. (Frontline Shelter Staff)

Conversely, youth participants described the shelter system as a dangerous place for LGBTQ2S young people due to widespread discrimination that is rarely dealt with or addressed. Prolific homophobia and transphobia characterized the vast majority of their experiences. Jamie Jach, one of many youth who spoke about feeling safer on the streets than in shelters, described living in a park during the coldest months of winter as preferable to the conditions in the shelter system:

I was taking so many sleeping pills so that I would sleep through the night. [...] 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. (Jamie Jach, 26 years old)

Staff participants spoke openly about the barriers experienced specifically by transgender shelter residents, such as not being able to stay in the shelter that aligns with their gender identity and staff not addressing them by their chosen names or pronouns. Not only is the shelter system not made accessible to transgender people, but also the attitudes and beliefs that govern the system are based on the assumption that people's lived gender identity will match the sex assigned to them at birth (e.g., that someone assigned female at birth will identify as a woman).

Transgender and gender non-conforming youth are often denied access to shelters based on their gender identity. Regardless of the shelter standards and policies, shelter workers struggle most with issues around access to services for transgender people, as illustrated in the following quote by a young trans woman:

They [shelter staff] specifically use your ID to place you on a gendered floor, whatever your ID says, regardless of how far you are in your transition. Imagine being a trans woman with bottom surgery and all, placed on the male floor. This is also against the Toronto Hostel Standards. When I got there, they refused my name, forced me to wear gendered clothing and fought with me every step of the way as I tried to fix these problems. (Teal, 23 years old)

The expectation that youth will fit into the gender binary makes the shelter system an especially difficult place for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. These beliefs are so ingrained in the culture and institutional rules of the shelter system that staffs are often unaware of how they marginalize transgender people:

A trans woman may sometimes be seen as stronger, in the eyes of a lot of people. When they [shelter workers] come in and they're like, 'a trans guy wants to sleep

on the guy floor, that's so unsafe'. But when a trans woman wants to go on the women's floor, suddenly the trans woman is fine, but everyone else is at risk. Trans women are seen as the aggressor immediately, whereas trans men are, 'this poor thing that we need to protect.' (Mouse, 22 years old)

Correspondingly, when interviewed, a City of Toronto Shelter Operations staff stated that the key focus of the shelter standards is on access and the ability to access the system with as few barriers as possible, which she described as a "human right." However, the same participant also stated that the City of Toronto was not able to guarantee this human right to transgender people, she noted:

> We cannot guarantee that every single shelter in our system is accessible to transgender persons; however, we do have shelters in every single area that can accommodate. So, it may not be unlimited amount of choice, but there are shelter beds available and with the limited amount of funding that we have available that is the best answer we can come to at this point. (City of Toronto Shelter Operations Staff)

This quote demonstrates the normalization of trans oppression that occurs in the shelter system. In an attempt to make the shelter system safer and more accessible to transgender youth, the City of Toronto implemented a rule that allocates 1–2 private rooms to transgender residents in shelters, as referenced in the quote above. However, this is not a formal shelter standard; therefore, there is no way of knowing which shelters follow this rule and how often. Segregating transgender youth in private rooms may also result in safety concerns because it automatically forces youth to out themselves as transgender, even if they are not ready to do so. This type of segregation inevitably contributes to the erasure of LGBTQ2S bodies in the shelter system.

To avoid the consequences of not fitting in and not conforming to hegemonic heteronormative and cisnormative beliefs, transgender youth will either engage in passing as heterosexual or cisgender or may avoid shelters altogether, due to difficulty with passing as cisgender, especially in the early stages of their transition.

Youth homophobia and transphobia: Hegemonic masculinity

The vast majority of homophobic and transphobic incidents were directed at young queer men by other young male shelter residents. Landon, one of numerous youth who described the majority of homophobia in the shelter system being perpetrated by big groups of boys, explains:

> There's a lot of homophobia. There are a lot of boys in big groups, you know, when boys are in a big group, it's very important to look straight. And a lot of gay kids get called 'faggot'. It's in a setting where there are a lot of boys, especially young boys, and it's really hard. (Landon, 26 years old)

How does this gender discrepancy happen? First, there is a higher ratio of homeless males than females, approximately 2:1, in Canada (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2009; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Second, culturally normative masculine behaviors, such as misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and aggression, are a way that young males try to obtain power and dominance in the shelter system and on the streets. These types of behaviors can be conceptualized as hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; McCormack, 2011). Hegemonic masculinity tends to suggest that which is the opposite of the cultural norm for feminine behavior.

Staff homophobia and transphobia

The data revealed two types of staff homophobia and transphobia that occur in the shelter system—the first is when staff themselves do something overtly homophobic or transphobic, and the second is when staff do not stop homophobic and transphobic incidents as they occur. Furthermore, it is accepted that certain shelters are unsafe for LGBTQ2S youth. For example, shelters located outside of Toronto or other major urban areas are often reluctant to admit LGBTQ2S youth and end up sending them to Toronto, or the next major city, with the false promise that they will be met with support, as an attempt to protect their safety. This phenomenon of access denial with the justification that safety is being protected conveys the message that LGBTQ2S youth cannot be anywhere because something is wrong with them, as exemplified in the following quote:

> In Newmarket we had some staff that would suggest to the kids that came out that they should go to Toronto because it's for your own safety because there's more of it [*LGBTQ2S people*] and in a small town you're one in a whole shelter. (Frontline Shelter Staff)

This study also revealed that shelter staff do not prioritize intervening in incidents of homophobia and transphobia. For example, one shelter staff stated:

> There are many instances in the shelters and in a lot of the places that I've worked, that what happens a lot of the times is that staff will turn a blind eye to it or not address it or just not put their foot down about it and I think that that's where a lot of the gaps in the systems lie. Or just burned out staff who may not necessarily be doing rounds. There was an incident at one of the youth shelters with one of our clients who was beaten up [*because he was gay*] in the shower there and it was a pretty brutal beating and staff didn't know about it. (Frontline Shelter Staff)

Shelter staff participants in focus groups alluded to walking away and ignoring homophobic and transphobic occurrences because they are overworked and stressed out. This suggests recognition, however, as soon as their colleagues in the same focus group denied such happenings, participants would either change their accounts or not offer any additional information.

Inadequate, invasive, and otherwise problematic rules

Shelter staffs' activities and behaviors are largely organized by key institutional texts, policies, and rules. Interestingly, it is both the excessive bureaucratic regulation and the lack of necessary bureaucratic regulation in highly significant areas that play a major role in creating the disjunctures that occur for LGBTQ2S youth in the shelter system. The findings presented in this section explain and illustrate how specific rules and policies in the shelter system create the disjunctures experienced by LGBTQ2S youth, and some of the ways that these rules and policies actually sustain the homophobia and transphobia in the shelter system.

Insufficient bureaucratic regulation

Shelter staffs are required to complete incident reports each time there is a violent incident in a shelter, but they are not required to document the entire incident, only as much as they consider necessary. The executive director then reviews all incident reports and may follow up with the residents, depending on the circumstance. All incidents are categorized on a monthly basis according to the terminology entered by staff filing incident reports. Needless to say, staff members holding the belief that youth use terms such as *homophobia* and *transphobia* as a way to protect themselves are unlikely to categorize incidents as "homophobic" or "transphobic."

Another area that lacks necessary bureaucratic regulation includes staff training. Individuals working at city-operated shelters are required, within the first 3 months of hire, to complete a specialized certificate preparing them to work with people experiencing homelessness. However, youth shelters in Toronto are city-funded, as opposed to city-operated. The training requirements for staff of city-funded shelters are not as strict as city-operated shelters. Executive directors of shelters are required to keep track of staff training and ensure that staff complete training within the mandated timelines. During an interview, when an executive director of a youth shelter was asked who monitors staff training, the following response was received: "Technically me, I guess." Keeping track of staff training records is not monitored closely enough by executive directors at shelters or by the City of Toronto Shelter Operations. During focus groups, shelter staffs were asked if their training was being monitored. What follows is an example of how two staff members (in the same focus group) responded to this question:

Frontline Shelter Staff 1: Not really, I don't think so.

Frontline Shelter Staff 2: No. There's a database down at the Training Centre, but here I don't think they really have it or enforce it. I've been here for over 3 years and I still have one that I have to take, so it's not being monitored.

Excessive bureaucratic regulation

The City of Toronto implements the rules and policies they believe are most helpful and necessary for the shelter system to operate efficiently and appropriately. The executive directors of shelters are expected to assign additional rules and guidelines to the shelters they manage and to monitor the work of their staff. Shelter workers are expected to follow the rules and policies and work in ways they deem appropriate; on the other hand, residents often do not find those rules and policies helpful but, rather, discriminatory and invasive. The social structure of the shelter system separates management from frontline workers and management from shelter residents, making it difficult to efficiently monitor and manage the disjunctures that occur.

The following quote portrays how one youth spoke about the social structure of the shelter system.

> It's transphobic, it's homophobic, and it seems to just become so systematic. We need a building for people to stay in, that's fine. Now we need all these rules, we need all these locked doors, now we need all these alarms, and we need this kind of worker, that kind of worker, paperwork. It's just a system, you know? (Jamie Jach, 26 years old)

The quote alludes to the excessive bureaucratic regulation and how it has created a system with deep systematic issues and barriers for those who may not easily fit in, such as LGBTQ2S youth.

Rules that have not been updated for years

Many of the institutional texts that organize the work of those in the shelter system are often not questioned and were developed and implemented prior to the shelter staff participants being hired. Some shelters have old rules that have not been updated for years; one of the shelters that participated in a focus group had never updated their original policies dating back to 1987. The shelter was initially faith-based, with homophobic rules that had been unchallenged and unquestioned for years. One staff member noted:

> It was actually in the procedures manual […] it said that we weren't allowed to admit anybody [LGBTQ], but we could help them find the proper classes to help them. When I first started, no one seemed to know where that came from, it was just in our policies and procedures manual, but the staff didn't agree with it either. It was just kind of there. (Frontline Shelter Staff)

Lack of knowledge

The findings of this study revealed that frontline shelter staff and management frequently show a glaring lack of knowledge and express ignorance with regard to LGBTQ2S residents. For example, numerous frontline shelter

staff lacked a basic understanding of the following terms, lesbian, transgender, homophobia, and transphobia; during a focus group, one shelter staff asked:

> If we call somebody, he or she, a lesbian, is it an insult? Because I heard that some of them don't like that. (Frontline Shelter Staff)

Shelter staff also erroneously presumed that they would be able to determine youth residents' gender and sexual identities based on physical appearance. Numerous frontline shelter staff stated that there are no LGBTQ2S youth residents at the shelters they are employed at, even though questions regarding gender and sexual identity were not included during intake procedures. For example, one staff stated: "It's [*LGBTQ2S youth*] not something we get a lot. But when we do …well, I think it depends on the person too and how they are. We don't get it [*LGBTQ2S youth*] a lot" (Frontline Shelter Staff).

Discussion and conclusion

The findings shared above describe how Toronto's shelter system perpetuates oppressive conditions for LGBTQ2S youth, and the types of issues and disjunctures experienced by LGBTQ2S youth in shelters. As outlined, staff do not always prioritize intervening in and stopping situations of homophobia and transphobia, due to willful ignorance and an inability to recognize homophobia and transphobia, resulting from the lack of training and knowledge reported by staff. This may have subsequently led to the greatest limitation of this study, which is associated with the reluctance of shelters to participate, which made it difficult to conduct this research in Toronto's shelter system. The lack of participation and interest from key Toronto-based shelters suggests that shelter management are aware of issues regarding homophobia and transphobia in the shelter system but fear the ramifications of coming forward and speaking about these issues. On the contrary, one of the first studies to investigate lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth homelessness in Toronto over two decades ago revealed that residential care services were eager and enthusiastic to participate in the study and were keenly interested in implementing necessary changes to better meet the needs of LGB youth (O'Brien et al., 1993).

Additionally, this study illustrated several ways that it has come to be accepted and normalized for shelters to be unsafe for LGBTQ2S youth, particularly those located outside of Toronto, where LGBTQ2S youth are not always admitted but are instead advised to find their way to the next urban setting. This creates major issues for LGBTQ2S youth in Canada's rural and remote locations, where there are limited services available to this population of youth. This suggests the need for more focused research and

investigation regarding how this finding impacts LGBTQ2S youth in rural settings across Canada.

The experiences of LGBTQ2S homeless youth in Canada have not been well documented over the past two decades; therefore, researchers have relied on data from the United States to better understand the phenomenon of LGBTQ2S youth homelessness. The findings of this study have provided evidence confirming that Toronto's shelter system is unsafe for LGBTQ2S youth, and that it is both the excessive bureaucratic regulation and the lack of necessary bureaucratic regulation in highly significant areas that play a major role in creating the disjunctures that occur for LGBTQ2S youth in shelters.

This study also found that LGBTQ2S youth, especially transgender youth, are unable to easily access shelters, due to discrimination, transphobia, and cisnormative staff and policies. This finding supports other work in this area in the United States (Choi et al., 2015; Cochran et al., 2002; Hussey, 2015). The presumption that all youth will fit into the gender binary makes the shelter system an especially challenging and inaccessible place for transgender and gender non-conforming youth, creating a situation in which staff do not respect residents' chosen names and pronouns, and youth are unable to stay in the shelter that aligns with their gender identity. Similarly, the FTM Safer Shelter Project (Denomme-Welch et al., 2008)—a community-based research project that investigated homelessness and shelter access among female-to-male (FtM) transgender people in Toronto—found that men's shelters were described as unsafe and women's shelters as unwelcoming for FtM transgender residents.

The results highlight the systemic enactment of homophobia, transphobia, and hegemonic masculinity that are rampant and normalized in shelters and create major barriers to safe, accessible, and supportive services for LGBTQ2S youth. The normalization of homophobia and transphobia make it difficult for shelter staff and management to recognize and acknowledge such occurrences, leading them to believe that they do not actually occur. There are also staff that undeniably view homophobic and transphobic slurs and behaviors as a rigid part of youth culture, rather than something that they can influence change in.

Based on the findings of this study, the following actions are recommended: shelter standards, rules, and policies should allow residents to self-select the shelter or floor where they feel safest and that aligns with their gender identity, as opposed to being forced to select a shelter based on the sex assigned to them at birth. In this regard, policies and rules should be implemented to strictly prohibit the gender surveillance and policing of gender presentation that occurs in the shelter system.

More bureaucratic regulation of the benign nature is needed—regulation that can benefit and protect LGBTQ2S residents, as well as ensure that all shelter

staff are following the rules and standards. Shelter providers and policy makers should listen to and take into consideration the perspectives and needs of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness to eliminate the disjunctures revealed in this study and to help create safe, accessible, and supportive services.

Texts coordinate people's actions (Campbell & Gregor, 2008; Smith, 1990); therefore, shelters should be equipped with anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia rules and policies to help coordinate LGBTQ2S positive, safe, and affirming actions and behaviors among staff and residents.

This study has found that the culture of the shelter system can be summarized as an overall atmosphere of normalized oppression in which homophobic and transphobic violence frequently occurs. This work suggests that it is young males who often perpetrate incidents of homophobia and transphobia in the shelter system, but that shelter staff also play a role in contributing to these incidents by not intervening and rarely acknowledging the existence of homophobia and transphobia. The results have likewise revealed that it is both the excessive bureaucratic regulation and the lack of necessary bureaucratic regulation in highly significant areas that play a key role in creating the disjunctures that occur for LGBTQ2S youth in shelters. There are specific rules and policies in place that create and sustain oppressive contexts for LGBTQ2S youth in the shelter system.

There is a dire need for the creation of specialized services and safe spaces for LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness, for stricter policies in the shelter system against homophobia and transphobia, and for more discussions of inclusion and acceptance among shelter providers and workers.

To conclude with a powerful quote from one of the youth participants:

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. (Landon, 26 years old)

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Appendices

Appendix A Youth Demographics Chart

Age	26: 30% (n = 3)
	27: 20% (n = 2)
	21: 10% (n = 1)
	22: 10% (n = 1)
	23: 10% (n = 1)
	24: 10% (n = 1)
	29: 10% (n = 1)
Gender	Male: 40% (n = 4)
	Female: 30% (n = 3)
	Transman: 10% (n = 1)
	Genderqueer: 10% (n = 1)
	Two-Spirit: 10% (n = 1)
Sexuality	Gay: 30% (n = 3)
	Queer: 20% (n = 2)
	Pansexual: 20% (n = 2)
	Fluid: 20% (n = 2)
	Lesbian: 10% (n = 1)
Race/Ethnicity	White: 50% (n = 5)
	Black: 30% (n = 3)
	Aboriginal/Native: 20% (n = 2)
Current living situation	Street-involved, but housed: 70% (n = 7)
	Couch Surfing: 20% (n = 2)
	Homeless Shelter: 10% (n = 1)
Main source of income	Welfare: 60% (n = 6)
	Working: 30% (n = 3)
	OSAP: 10% (n = 1)