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# Homeless in Europe

A Magazine by FEANTSA



FEANTSA



## PRIDE: HOMELESSNESS IN THE LGBTIQ COMMUNITY

# CONTENTS

- 3** Editorial
- 5** Tackling the Disproportionate Issue of LGBTI Homelessness
- 9** The Impact of COVID-19 on 2SLGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness
- 14** Focus Ireland – Challenging LGBTQI+ Homelessness in Collaboration with BelongTo LGBTQI+ Youth Ireland
- 18** Gender Norms Prevent LGBT+ People Experiencing Homelessness from Accessing Help
- 24** How Best to Support Male and Trans\* Sex Workers Experiencing Homelessness
- 28** Supporting Transgender People in Inpatient Emergency Housing Facilities in Germany
- 33** Grassroot Community Engagement for Preventing LGBTIQ+ (Youth) Homelessness
- 38** The Risk of Homelessness for the LGBTQIA+ Community in Poland
- 43** Refuge Bruxelles: Because It's Needed
- 48** In Their Own Words: Momo's Experience of LGBTQ+ Homelessness



In 2017, FEANTSA published our last magazine on LGBTIQ homelessness, which was the launch pad for an amazing new area of work for our network. A lot has changed in that time, which paints two contrasting stories on LGBTIQ rights in Europe.

On the one hand Europe is becoming a more dangerous place for LGBTIQ people. According to ILGA Europe, 2022 was the most violent year in Europe for LGBTIQ people in over a decade, with rising attacks, murders and two terrorist attacks on the LGBTIQ community. This doesn't happen in a vacuum. These attacks are fuelled by wider hate speech. Anti LGBTIQ voices are emboldened by such hate speech creating a more hostile environment for LGBTIQ people.

On the other hand, when it comes to homelessness, there is a different story emerging. The homeless sector has made huge strides in the past 5 years. When we published our last LGBTIQ themed magazine there was little to no understanding of LGBTIQ homelessness in Europe. But today we have research that maps the challenges of working on the topic for both LGBTIQ and homeless organisations, we have delivered trainings to make services more inclusive, we have data from a European agency demonstrating the scale of LGBTIQ homelessness and at national level there is a growing level of research which in turn is leading to specialised services and new policies at the member state level.

The articles in this magazine paint a picture of hope and progress, while there is still a lot to be done to improve homeless services for LGBTIQ people, we can also point to our successes, and inspire organisations to deliver safer and more inclusive services.

Writing for ILGA-Europe Brian Finnegan highlights the worsening socio-economic situation that LGBTIQ people find themselves when it comes to discrimination in the job market, difficult making ends meet and the over-representation of the LGBTIQ community, particularly for trans and intersex people, among the homeless population.

The research from Denmark highlights how experiences of homophobia and transphobia can push people away from services and identifies several barriers LGBTIQ people face in accessing the right supports. Similar research conducted in Ireland has showcased the importance of safe and empowering spaces to provide supports and the value of research to shape the design of trainings to make services more inclusive.

While services return to normal post-COVID, we look at the lessons learned from COVID, with Canadian research on how LGBTIQ youth experiencing homelessness, or risk of homelessness, were negatively impacted by restrictions, giving us further insights into how to cater to the needs of LGBTIQ youth within services.

# EDITORIAL



By **Robbie Stakelum**, Policy officer, FEANTSA

Despite growing anti-trans rhetoric and hate speech, Germany has developed national guidance for supporting trans and intersex people within in services, and in this magazine, we have showcased how a woman's homeless service continues to support trans women by putting these guidelines into practice.

Even in countries like Poland which have imposed 'LGBTI free zones', we have seen the power of city led and local initiatives to help protect LGBTIQ people experiencing homelessness. While Ljubljana Pride Association demonstrates the power of community organising, as they lead the charge in creating short term housing solutions for LGBTIQ people while delivering trainings to make existing services safer and more inclusive.

We know from speaking with frontline workers that the LGBTIQ community are not just over-represented within homeless services but also among sex workers, and for many organisations this is a difficult topic to engage in. The article from Alias shines a light on how to support LGBTIQ sex workers who are also experiencing hidden homelessness or housing instability in a non-judgemental and harm reducing way.

Behind all the data and research and community organising, we also have the story of Momo, a client at Le Refuge in Brussels, which is an organisation supporting LGBTIQ people experiencing homelessness. Take the time to read Momo's story, which demonstrates from their first-hand experience how important safe and inclusive services are in ensuring people have the supports to not just exit homelessness but to have hope, community and to feel empowered.

While the outlook for LGBTIQ people in Europe is complex and, in some contexts, perhaps even negative, my hope is that the articles shared in this edition inspire your work and showcase how as a sector we can improve our response and make the lives of all LGBTIQ people feel respected and valued as we support their exit from homelessness.



# TACKLING THE DISPROPORTIONATE ISSUE OF LGBTI HOMELESSNESS

ILGA-Europe is an umbrella organisation that unites organisations throughout Europe and Central Asia, to connect activists, allies, and institutions for the promotion of LGBTI rights (among other equality and social justice movements). In this article, ILGA-Europe introduces the relationship between the increased rates of homelessness for LGBTI and socio-economic injustice, drawing on data from several research projects. Highlighting work done in cooperation with FEANTSA, they discuss the need for cooperation and mutual learning between homeless services and LGBTI organisation.



By **Brian Finnegan**, Communications Director, ILGA Europe

It is not often that LGBTI people and homelessness are mentioned in the same sentence. However, in truth, housing instability, insecurity, and homelessness impact LGBTI people globally - in particular, trans and intersex people, and LGBTI youth.

At ILGA-Europe we have been working over the past few years, and are increasing our work, on socio-economic justice for LGBTI people in Europe and Central Asia. By socio-economic justice, we mean the removal of obstacles and oppressions which disproportionately worsen the social and economic conditions of already marginalised populations. This includes – but is not limited to – rights that states have accepted as necessary for individuals and groups to live sustainably in dignity and freedom within a given society, such as education, work, health, an adequate standard of living, and housing.

An above average number of LGBTI people are in uncertain employment, which often leads to housing instability, with trans and intersex people experiencing even higher rates of socio-economic exclusion than cisgender, non-trans, lesbians, gay and bisexual people. This is very often due to discrimination in education, access to the labour market, and discrimination in the labour market - a discrimination which persists in other areas of life that increase LGBTI people's risk of falling below the poverty line, such as access to housing.

According to the second LGBTI survey conducted by FRA in 2019, in the preceding 12 months 10% of respondents had felt discriminated against when looking for a job; this number rose to 32% for trans respondents and 27% for intersex respondents. In addition, the survey included for the first time questions on 'having difficulties to make ends meet' and 'having experiences of being homeless'.

One third of all LGBTI respondents indicated that their households had difficulty to make ends meet. This rose to 52% for intersex respondents, and 46% for trans respondents.

According to the same survey 29% of intersex respondents and 25% of trans respondents had some form of housing difficulty in their lifetime. This figure is 17% for cisgender LGB respondents.

When it comes to young LGBTI people experiencing homelessness, the figures are equally worrying. In 2021, ILGA-Europe carried out a survey on the issue in association with the organisation supporting young LGBTIQ homeless people in the United States, True Colors United, and the Silberman Center for Sexuality and Gender (SCSG) at Hunter College. The [resulting report](#) pointed to a large prevalence of LGBTI youth homelessness across Europe, with over 60% of LGBTI organisations surveyed saying they had worked with young people who experienced homelessness.

The survey found that the most prevalent cause for LGBTI youth homelessness is identity-related family conflict, as reported by 71%, while lack of institutional support and social rejection were reported by 44% as a major cause.

Meanwhile, a [comparative report](#) from FEANTSA also found that over 60% of homeless services organisations had dealt with young LGBTIQ people experiencing homelessness but often without any training or support. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of respondents indicated that no national policy existed specifically addressing the issue of LGBTI youth homelessness and over half of respondents (59%) reported a lack of governmental support for programmes that focus on LGBTI youth homelessness, including nearly half (47%) reporting a lack of funding support for such programmes.





Now that we are currently living in a pandemic-free world, it is not likely the specific vulnerabilities for LGBTI people have changed or lessened. Yet, LGBTI homelessness remains hidden in Europe.”

Many homelessness organisations found themselves at a loss for how to deal with the specific issues facing homeless LGBTI youth. The most frequently reported challenges included the organisation not knowing how to approach the topic of LGBTIQ identities; not being confident in its ability to speak about LGBTIQ issues; and fearing that some LGBTIQ young people would experience violence or abuse in the service setting if their sexual orientation or gender identity was made known.

The survey was launched during the COVID pandemic, which enormously exacerbated the vulnerability of LGBTI youth to homelessness, and its devastating effects for all parts of the LGBTI community were reported in ILGA-Europe’s Annual Reviews covering [2020](#) and [2021](#). The COVID pandemic is over, but its effects on socio-economic inequality will be lasting and detrimental for many subpopulations. Now that we are currently living in a pandemic-free world, it is not likely the specific vulnerabilities for LGBTI people have changed or lessened. Yet, LGBTI homelessness remains hidden in Europe.

We lack the data and the robust research to fully understand the prevalence, forms, and dynamics of LGBTI homelessness in different local contexts. This lack of knowledge across the European Union leads to a lack of targeted services, absence of national policies specifically addressing the issue of LGBTI homelessness, and limited funding, if any, for programmes that include or focus on unhoused LGBTI communities. Often, LGBTI organisations have to step up to support their communities in situations of homelessness where there are gaps in services and when assistance is unavailable or inaccessible.



Working with FEANTSA, ILGA-Europe have started to bring LGBTI organisations and homelessness providers together to foster mutual understanding and learning, and to begin the work to ensure homelessness services are safe and accessible for the LGBTI community. To build on this ILGA-Europe have launched a call for a new programme, which will sustain the vital work of understanding the root causes and forms of LGBTI homelessness and advocate for improving access of LGBTI communities to services and housing.

Through this programme we want to enhance and advance the work of LGBTI organisations with considerable existing expertise in the field. We believe that having a small group of strong organisations with a strengthened experience around LGBTI homelessness will bring new learnings and insights that can be shared with a wider movement, and benefit other organisations who are at the beginning of their work on homelessness in their respective countries.

With such large numbers at stake, we believe the wider network of organisations in Europe working on homelessness should spend real time and energy focusing on similar work, identifying the specific needs of LGBTI people accessing to their services and how to address them, and finding ways to connect to LGBTI people who are experiencing homelessness in their lives.

**“An above average number of LGBTI people are in uncertain employment, which often leads to housing instability, with trans and intersex people experiencing even higher rates of socio-economic exclusion than cisgender, non-trans, lesbians, gay and bisexual people.”**



# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON 2SLGBTQ+ YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the mental and physical health of 2SLGBTQ+ youth, including a rise in homelessness. This was related to the obligation to isolate in unsafe and unsupportive living environments, and a reduction in the availability of care services. Following this, Dr Abramovich explores the need for 2SLGBTQ+ oriented training in housing, employment, health care and social services, and a particular need for improved preventative mental health support and safe housing services.



By **Dr. Alex Abramovich**, PhD, Independent Scientist,  
Institute for Mental Health Policy Research, CAMH, Canada

Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (2SLGBTQ+) youth experience significantly higher rates of homelessness and mental health issues compared to heterosexual and cisgender youth, due to stigma, discrimination, and identity-based rejection.<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, 2SLGBTQ+ youth have experienced these stressors in both increased and new ways. For example, due to a lack of housing options resulting from the pandemic, many 2SLGBTQ+ youth were forced to isolate at home with unsupportive and abusive family members.<sup>3</sup> Countless youth also had difficulties receiving the support they rely on or accessing new support services as many crisis services had to close their doors or limit the number of clients they can serve due to COVID-19 restrictions. This is a devastating loss for anyone; however, for some 2SLGBTQ+ youth, this has been extremely dangerous.

Our research sought to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on 2SLGBTQ+ youth at risk of, and experiencing, homelessness in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and surrounding areas in Ontario, Canada.<sup>3,6,7</sup> This study aimed to understand the specific challenges, coping strategies, and mental health responses of 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to provide evidence-based recommendations for how service providers, policy makers, and public health officials can appropriately address the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ youth during future waves of COVID-19 and in the aftermath of the pandemic. 2SLGBTQ+ youth (n=92) participated in three online surveys to assess mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicidality), alcohol and substance use, health care access, and experiences of violence between 2021-2022, and 47 individuals (including youth, frontline staff, and management from youth serving organizations) participated in virtual one-on-one interviews.

- 1 Abramovich, A., & Shelton, J. (Eds.). (2017). Where am I going to go?: Intersectional approaches to ending LGBTQ2S youth homelessness in Canada & the U.S. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. Available from: <https://www.homelesshub.ca/WhereAmIGoingtoGo>
- 2 Abramovich, I. A. (2012). No safe place to go LGBTQ youth homelessness in Canada: Reviewing the literature. *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth/Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de la Jeunesse*, 4(1), 29–51. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy16579>
- 3 Abramovich, A., Pang, N., & Moss, A. (2022). Experiences of Family Violence Among 2SLGBTQ+ Youth At Risk Of, And Experiencing, Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 26(3), 265-288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2022.2076759>
- 4 Choi, S. K., Wilson, B. D., Shelton, J., & Gates, G. J. (2015). Serving our youth 2015: The needs and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth experiencing homelessness. The Williams Institute with True Colours Fund.
- 5 Durso, L. E., & Gates, G. J. (2012). Serving our youth: Findings from a national survey of services providers working with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The Williams Institute with True Colors fund and the Palette Fund.

- 6 Abramovich, A., Pang, N., Moss, A., Logie, C. H., Chaiton, M., Kidd, S. A., & Hamilton, H. A. (2021). Investigating the impacts of COVID-19 among LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness. *PLoS One*, 16(9), e0257693. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257693>
- 7 Abramovich, A., Pang, N., Kunasekaran, S., Moss, A., Kiran, T., & Pinto, A.D. (2022). Examining COVID-19 vaccine uptake and attitudes among 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. *BMC Public Health*, 22(122): <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-12537-x>

## HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT 2SLGBTQ+ YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS?

2SLGBTQ+ youth reported higher rates of mental health and substance use issues since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic due to various reasons, including economic and service impacts (e.g., lay-offs), being forced to isolate with unsupportive or abusive family, limited access to health and social services, and losing access to safe community spaces and supports. There was a significant rise in 2SLGBTQ+ youth living in shelters, transitional housing programs, group homes, and public spaces since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, 12% of youth reported living in a public space (e.g., park, vehicle) prior to the pandemic, compared to 32% of youth since the pandemic began. Young people shared stories about pitching tents in cemeteries, due to a lack of safe housing options. One participant described the cemetery as a safe place where no one would bother them.

Youth spoke at length about being trapped inside with unsupportive, homophobic, and transphobic family members, with little ability to escape. Youth described feeling exhausted, sad, and disheartened by ongoing identity-based rejection in their homes and being unable to self-express in ways that were true to their core existence. For example, one youth shared: “You’re isolating 24/7 with your emotional and psychological and religious abusers. That has been pretty awful to say the least.”

Congregate living settings made it difficult to follow public health guidelines, and rigid rules within housing programs resulted in decreased accessibility (e.g., restricting outside social interactions, including seeing loved ones and going to work). Many services, including

specialized health care clinics, social services, and housing programs previously available to 2SLGBTQ+ youth, offered limited support during the pandemic, with increased wait-times, and a decrease in the frequency and level of support available. A major barrier described by transgender and non-binary youth was the cancellation and postponement of gender-affirming and inclusive care and interventions (e.g., access to hormones and transition-related surgery). Research has consistently reported that transgender individuals are medically underserved, and experience poor mental health outcomes and high rates of disease burden compared to cisgender individuals, including significantly higher rates of suicidality, substance use, depression, and anxiety.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Gender-affirming care leads to improved quality of life and psychological outcomes.

Youth reported long waitlists and a lack of resources, resulting in detrimental impacts to their mental health, including depression, anxiety, and suicidality. The majority of youth reported changes to their access to medical and mental health care, as well as social support services since the beginning of the pandemic. One participant stated: “Those immediate supports that you could have access to prior to COVID-19, because there were so many, are now almost obsolete.”

8 Vigny-Pau, M., Pang, N., Alkhenaini, H., & Abramovich, A. (2021). Suicidality and non-suicidal self-injury among transgender populations: A systematic review. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 25(4), 358–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2021.1955195>

9 Winter, S., Diamond, M., Green, J., Karasic, D., Reed, T., Whittle, S., & Wylie, K. (2016). Transgender people: health at the margins of society. *Lancet*, 388(10042), 390-400. [10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)00683-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)00683-8)

10 Abramovich, A., de Oliveira, C., Kiran, T., Iwajomo, T., Ross, L.E., & Kurdyak, P. (2020). Assessment of Health Conditions and Health Service Use Among Transgender Patients in Canada. *JAMA Network Open*, 3(8):e2015036.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in numerous services being offered online. Participants reported varied experiences accessing virtual care. On one hand, virtual care created a more accessible service system for some youth, but on the other hand, it resulted in major privacy concerns, resulting in inaccessibility issues for others, particularly for youth living at home with unsupportive families, and for folks without reliable internet and/or devices. For example, one youth shared:

*I'm in my house and if I'm not in the lowest corner of my basement my family can hear me and I don't want that. So, the pandemic has made it harder to get help in the first place and then once I have it, it's harder to talk about it and to figure out things that work.*

An important component of this study involved the examination of COVID-19 vaccine uptake and vaccine attitudes among 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. Although most participants had received or were planning to receive the vaccine, more than one third of youth were unsure or were not planning to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. Those who identified as Indigenous, Asian, Black, or Latinx were almost five times as likely to be hesitant about the COVID-19 vaccine compared to White participants. Mistrust in the health care system, previous traumatic experiences engaging with health care providers, barriers accessing the vaccine, and ongoing mental health issues were among the most common reasons cited by youth for not getting vaccinated. Youth described feeling dehumanised in their interactions with health providers and the health care system mainly due to multiple intersections of their identity (e.g., homelessness, race, 2SLGBTQ+ identity). In the context of engaging with service providers, one youth shared: "Homeless people are almost never viewed as actual human beings. We are almost always viewed as subhuman."

**Youth described feeling exhausted, sad, and disheartened by ongoing identity-based rejection in their homes and being unable to self-express in ways that were true to their core existence.”**

## WAYS FORWARD – TIME TO TAKE ACTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the lives of 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. Despite the already elevated rates of mental health and substance use concerns prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, our findings suggest that the pandemic has had a major impact on the mental health and wellbeing among 2SLGBTQ+ youth at risk of, and experiencing, homelessness. Our study also demonstrated an increase in detrimental health outcomes, including self-harm, and problematic alcohol and substance use. This is worrisome considering that most participants reported being unable to access the care they needed.

Housing, employment, health care, and social service systems are often not constructed for, or trained appropriately to meet, the specific needs of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals - especially those who navigate systems with multiple marginalized identities and experience multiple forms of oppression and stigma related to racism, transphobia, and homophobia. The systems that we currently have in place, which are meant to serve, protect, and support those in need, often perpetuate violence and discrimination against 2SLGBTQ+ people. Accessing housing and health care as a 2SLGBTQ+ identified person can be a challenging and stressful experience filled with many obstacles, especially since the pandemic.

There is an urgent need for preventive and longer-term 2SLGBTQ+ specialised mental health support and treatment, in addition to emergency/crisis services. Participants spoke directly to the need for 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive and affirming services and service providers. All staff should be trained and educated on the lived realities and needs of 2SLGBTQ+ youth. Efforts are required to ensure that services are more accessible to youth experiencing homelessness and to those unable to access services virtually. There is also an urgent need for 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive, affirming, and safe housing options because everyone deserves a safe place to call home and it is time we make this a top priority.

# FOCUS IRELAND – CHALLENGING LGBTQI+ HOMELESSNESS IN COLLABORATION WITH BELONGTO LGBTQI+ YOUTH IRELAND

Independent research into LGBTQI+ Youth homelessness in Ireland identified the need for specific and targeting guidelines on LGBTQI+ and LGBTQI+ youth homelessness services and care. Focus Ireland outlines their development of a training programme for LGBTQI+ homelessness collaboration with the Homeless Network and BelongTo LGBTQI+ Youth Ireland. This includes in systems of prevention, emergency accommodation, and long-term support structures, to be aided by the integration of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness concerns into policy.



By **Adam Spollen**, Policy officer, Focus Ireland, Ireland

## INTRODUCTION

International research has indicated that young people who identify as LGBTQI+ are disproportionately represented amongst young people experiencing homelessness. In the United Kingdom, the Albert Kennedy Trust found that 24% of young homeless people identified as LGBTQI+,<sup>1</sup> while in Canada, 29.5% of young people experiencing homelessness self-identified as LGBTQI+.<sup>2</sup> In the Irish context, an EU Fundamental Rights Agency survey conducted in 2019 showed that LGBTQI+ Irish people experienced homelessness at a higher rate than the EU average,<sup>3</sup> however this survey did not differentiate between the general population experiencing homelessness and the experience of young people. As of July 2020, when this survey was published, there was no research available on LGBTQI+ youth homelessness in Ireland.

In September 2020, 'A Qualitative Study of LGBTQI+ Youth Homelessness in Ireland' was published.<sup>4</sup> This independent research by Prof Michelle Norris and Dr Aideen Quilty, commissioned by Focus Ireland and supported by BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland, was the first of its kind in an Irish context - a response to both international research and the experiences of frontline staff highlighting the issue.

In keeping with international research,<sup>5</sup> the key findings of this report included a synchronous dual set of triggers into youth homelessness; those which effect young people generally, such as household disruption or familial substance abuse, as well as LGBTQI+ specific triggers such as familial relationship breakdown as a result of sexual orientation or gender identity disclosure. Additionally, a number of factors were identified as impeding access to homeless services for LGBTQI+ young people experiencing homelessness. These factors included internalised stigma and shame, and experiences of homophobia or transphobia within emergency sheltered accommodation. The research also addressed barriers to successfully exiting homelessness and underlines the importance of a safe and supportive environment within support services for young LGBTQI+ people's mental health and wellbeing during the journey to find safe, secure, and suitable long-term accommodation.

Upon publication of this report, Focus Ireland Director of Advocacy, Mike Allen, noted that –

*"[t]his report is not the end of our work on this issue, but it marks a crucial stage from evidence gathering to action".*

1 Albert Kennedy Trust (2015). LGBT Youth Homelessness: A UK National Scoping of Cause, Prevalence, Response, and Outcome, UK: Albert Kenny Trust.

2 Gaetz, S, O'Grady, B, Kidd, S and Schwan, K (2016). Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

3 EU Fundamental Rights Agency (2020), Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, Brussels: EUFRA.

4 Quilty, A. and Norris, M. (2020) A Qualitative Study of LGBTQI+ Youth Homelessness in Ireland. Dublin: Focus Ireland.

5 Ream, G.L., and Forge, N., (2014). 'Homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth in New York City: Insights from the field', Child Welfare, 93 (2) 7-22.



The inclusion of LGBTQI+ within national homelessness policy serves to acknowledge the intersectional nature of homelessness and how it relates to sexuality and gender identity.”

## DEVELOPMENT OF LGBTQI+ HOMELESSNESS TRAINING

The recommendations of this report included that Focus Ireland, along with the Homeless Network (a network of non-profit providers of homeless services in the Dublin region), should identify and commission appropriate specialist training from LGBTQI+ organisations for staff working in the key access points and services. Additionally, it was recommended that the forthcoming Youth Homelessness Strategy, which the current Government committed to developing in its 2020 Programme for Government, should include a ‘homelessness prevention’ pillar with specific reference to the particular risks and pathways into homelessness that LGBTQI+ youth are likely to experience.

These recommendations have directed the work of Focus Ireland on the issue of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness since the report’s publication.

The aforementioned Homeless Network agreed to be the sector-wide champion of this work and established an LGBTQI+ homelessness working group, co-chaired by Focus Ireland and BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland. In 2021, the working group conducted a training needs analysis which involved a survey of 270 staff working in frontline homeless services, as well as focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The results identified four key areas of need for staff; to understand LGBTQI+ terminology; training on LGBTQI+ homelessness to ensure staff have confidence in their practice; to feel supported within their role by senior management; and to develop knowledge on pathways to LGBTQI+ specific support services. These key areas of need informed the development of a specialist training pilot programme by BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland. The pilot training was successfully delivered to both frontline staff and senior management of organisations within the LGBTQI+ homelessness working group in 2022.

The learnings taken from these pilot training sessions informed the development of a programme for LGBTQI+ homelessness training by Focus Ireland and BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland, which can facilitate the establishment of a network of LGBTQI+ friendly services across areas such as homelessness prevention and tenancy sustainment, the provision of emergency accommodation, and long-term supported accommodation.

## ADVOCACY WORK ON LGBTQI+ HOMELESSNESS

Simultaneously to the development of specialist training in partnership with BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland, Focus Ireland strongly advocated for the inclusion of LGBTQI+ homelessness within regional and national homelessness policy since the publication of the report, both as an organisation and as a member of the Irish Coalition to End Youth Homelessness. The primary focus of this advocacy work was campaigning for a national strategy on youth homelessness.

The inclusion of LGBTQI+ homelessness within national homelessness policy was achieved in the Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023 – 2025 (the first national strategy on youth homelessness since 2001) and launched by the Department of Housing in November 2022. This policy document acknowledged young people who identify as LGBTQI+ as being of heightened vulnerability to homelessness. As well as providing actions which, if implemented and sufficiently resourced, could ensure homeless service providers are capable of addressing the needs of LGBTQI+ young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The inclusion of LGBTQI+ within national homelessness policy serves to acknowledge the intersectional nature of homelessness and how it relates to sexuality and gender identity.

The strategy includes a commitment to provide LGBTQI+ youth homelessness training workshops for service providers across Ireland, which strengthens the position of the programme developed by Focus Ireland and BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland and the commitment to implement the recommendations contained within the 2020 report.

## THE NEXT STEPS

In 2021 Ireland signed the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness, committing to working towards ending homelessness by 2030. For this goal to be achieved, resources must be provided to tackle the pathways towards homelessness experienced by young people, including the unique pathways experienced by LGBTQI+ youth. As noted by Professor Stephen Gaetz at a seminar with Focus Ireland on the Canadian 'A Way Home' model –

*“If you are not looking at LGBTQ homelessness you are not dealing with the causes of youth homelessness.”*

The research developed on LGBTQI+ youth homelessness in Ireland in 2020 highlighted the pathways towards homelessness experienced by LGBTQI+ young people in an Irish context. The training programme developed by Focus Ireland and BelongTo LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland and supported by non-profit providers of homeless services within the Homeless Network, provides the tools to address these pathways. The successful implementation of the LGBTQI+ specific actions contained in Ireland's Youth Homelessness Strategy requires cooperation and collaboration by State bodies and homeless service providers to ensure that LGBTQI+ people at risk of homelessness are supported through inclusive prevention measures, and that those currently experiencing homelessness are supported through their journeys to find safe, secure, and suitable long-term accommodation.

# GENDER NORMS PREVENT LGBT+ PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS FROM ACCESSING HELP

The Danish 2021 'LGBT+ Homelessness' research project by Projekt Udenfor highlighted gender and sexuality norms as both a root cause of LGBT+ homelessness, and a barrier to accessing help. Here, this concept is explored in combination with additional barriers within Denmark's social service system – e.g., the 'catch-22' of accessing gender affirming healthcare. The article emphasises the need to tackle social stigmas surround gender and sexuality, and for LGBT+ focused services and specialised training for homeless service providers.



By **Kirsten Skovlund Asmussen**,  
Communications and Dissemination Officer, Projekt Udenfor, Denmark

To obtain a better understanding of homelessness among LGBT+ people in Denmark and the particular challenges they might encounter, Projekt Udenfor carried out a pilot project from 2021 to 2022 that combined social work with a qualitative study. For several of the participants in the project a lack of recognition by the help system when first reaching out, mistrust due to previous experiences with neglect, and lack of safety or feelings of safety were barriers preventing them from accessing help for their situation.

LGBT+<sup>1</sup> people in Denmark, as in many other countries, experience poorer health and overall well-being compared to the rest of the population, are at risk of being the victims of discrimination and hate crimes, and may experience obstacles in relation to living fully and freely as who they are. Furthermore, international studies show that LGBT+ people are overrepresented among people who experience homelessness, where the risk of violence and social exclusion escalates.

Nevertheless, in a Danish context there is limited knowledge about the extent of and challenges faced by LGBT+ people experiencing homelessness (PEH), just as there is limited social initiatives with a specialised focus on their needs.

## PROJECT 'LGBT+ HOMELESSNESS'

To create awareness and bring insights and knowledge to the table in a Danish context, we launched a one-year pilot project in 2021 that combined social work with a qualitative study. During the project period, a social outreach worker sought out and worked with LGBT+ PEH to assess the need for a targeted initiative. At the same time, an academic worker collected qualitative data to investigate and map out the challenges that homeless LGBT+ people might encounter.

The qualitative study was based on semi-structured interviews with seven informants. In addition, the research involved interviews with four professionals from the social sector, a literature review, and field notes from 22 informal visits and conversations with institutions and employees in the field of homelessness.

The investigation points out that norms for gender and sexuality contribute to a process of alienation which can be an important factor as to why LGBT+ people experience homelessness, and likewise set up barriers for accessing help for their homeless situations.

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1 In the pilot project we used the shorter collective term LGBT+ instead of the longer LGBTQIA+ to reduce any potential language and comprehension barriers in interdisciplinary collaborations with actors in the field of homelessness. The target group was not considered a homogenous group that necessarily had the same struggles or needs.



To cope as children and young adults, they hid, suppressed, or completely avoided exploring the aspects of their identity that they feared could ostracise them from their families. Consequently, they felt different, wrong, and experienced loneliness.”

## LACK OF ACCEPTANCE IN THE FAMILY

Several of the informants experienced alienation within their families due to a lack of understanding or acceptance of LGBT+ people. This was, amongst other things, expressed through homophobic and transphobic statements from the parents or other family members. For three of the informants such statements and attitudes had been present throughout their upbringing – even before they became aware of or began to talk openly about their LGBT+ identity.

To cope as children and young adults, they hid, suppressed, or completely avoided exploring the aspects of their identity that they feared could ostracise them from their families. Consequently, they felt different, wrong, and experienced loneliness.

As a result of the hostile environment at home, some of the informants chose to move out at a young age to be able to live openly as who they are, while others were kicked out or sent away; this, without the support of the family, eventually became one of the major factors leading them to experiencing homelessness.

Thus, not living up to norms for gender and sexuality estranged them from their families early on. The same norms, in combination with experiences of neglect and the mistrust that follows, became barriers to receiving help for their homeless situation from the welfare system.

## BARRIERS ACCESSING HELP TO THEIR HOMELESS SITUATION

Several of the informants reported that they felt misunderstood and rejected when they reached out for help from different parts of the welfare system for the first time. Such was the case for “Andy” (they/ them). Andy didn’t reach out until they had no other choice than to sleep rough. Before that they had couch surfed, trying to avoid the system which they mistrusted.

When Andy contacted the local social services, they were met with a lack of understanding of why they couldn’t live with their family because of their sexual orientation and thus a reluctance from the municipality to recognise their situation as homelessness. After that, Andy did not reach out to the municipality again. Another informant, “Loui” (they/them), recounted being rejected because they did not fit into the municipality’s expectations of who a person experiencing homelessness might be, with a similar consequence: they went years without being in touch with the system. In both cases, the welfare system failed to identify or recognize the informant’s situation as homelessness, leaving them without help.

In addition to the lack of recognition, the fear of, and past experiences with, homophobic and transphobic harassment or even violence (both on the street and in the homeless services) prevented some of the informants from seeking help. Those who did and for example, checked in to a homeless hostel, described in several cases how discomfort or outright feelings of insecurity accompanied them while living there.

The barriers for LGBT+ PEH accessing support thus consist of a lack of recognition by the help system, mistrust due to previous experiences with neglect, and the lack of safety or feelings of safety. Adding to these barriers, the Danish welfare system is designed in a way that compartmentalises help for the social-, physical- and mental health issues that some of the informants struggled with, even though the issues are intertwined. An example of this compartmentalisation can be seen in relation to the health sector.

## A CATCH 22 KEEPS HOMELESS LGBT+ PEOPLE IN A VULNERABLE SITUATION

Several of the informants used substances to cope with unpleasant experiences, homelessness, and bodily discomfort and dysphoria, which several of the trans people in the project struggled with. Such was the case again for “Andy”, who explained that they consumed alcohol to avoid feeling their body.

To receive hormone treatment as a trans person in Denmark, you must acquire approval from the Centre for Gender Identity.<sup>2</sup> The overall assessment takes into account the person’s stability, and substance use is usually considered as a negative indication. However, in Andy’s case, the lack of hormone treatment and the associated dysphoria was part of the reason for their use of substances.

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Gender Identity (CKI) works with citizens who wants health professional help in connection with gender identity matters.

To complicate matters even further, Andy also explained how receiving hormone treatment as part of their transition process was made difficult by the fact that they were struggling with mental illness. When consulting a doctor, they were told that they could only be referred to Centre for Gender Identity once they had been treated for PTSD. But since psychiatric treatment and treatment for addiction are managed separately in the public system, addiction can make it difficult to access psychiatric treatment and vice versa.

Andy's experiences illustrate how both mental health issues and addiction can prevent trans people from receiving trans-specific healthcare services. In Andy's case, the catch 22 thus consists in the fact that the health services that could be a part of the solution to problems related to mental illness and the use of substances (problems often linked to the risk of homelessness), thereby providing stability, are not provided due to an assessment of lack of stability, which in turn is exacerbated by their homeless situation.

## **SOCIAL WORKER: “IT’S AS IF TRANSWOMEN OWE IT TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES IN A FEMININE WAY”**

Gender norms also create barriers in a much more explicit way. At some women-specific homeless services, it is the Danish civil registration number<sup>3</sup> that determines whether a person can enter. If a person has a civil registration number that ends with an even number, that person is legally a woman in the Danish system and will therefore have access to these services. In other women-specific homeless services the access is based on which gender the person identifies as.

However, in both cases the interviews with the professionals indicated that there is an underlying, and sometimes explicit, expectation that a person must ‘look like a woman’ or act ‘feminine’ to be able to use a women-specific service. As one of the social professionals explained: *“It’s as if transgender women really owe it to express themselves in a feminine way. No one says anything about a cisgender woman not wearing make-up, having short hair, or wearing jeans and a hoodie.”* This can set up barriers specifically for trans women that either do not want to, or are unable to, express themselves as feminine enough to pass, or who are not far along in their transition process.

One professional in the investigation explained that it can be a challenge to meet the needs of women who have been exposed to violence and abuse by men, and the needs of trans women who do not pass as women, but who need a shielded place where they are able to live out their gender identity in a safer environment.

<sup>3</sup> The civil registration number (CPR-number) consists of ten digits, the first of which contain your date of birth. It is personal and unique and is used by all authorities for identification and as a case number. It is given to all citizens and people with a residence permit in Denmark.

## NEXT STEPS IN SECURING ACCESS TO HELP

The investigation thus concluded that LGBT+ PEH lack concrete places to go where they feel safe and can receive help from social professionals that recognise them and pay attention to their specific needs – and that, without it, they are in risk of not receiving help at all. Based on this conclusion, Projekt Udenfor will launch a new project later this year. During the project, two professionals will establish a safe space in Copenhagen where LGBT+ PEH can show up and get help that responds to their specific needs, and where they can meet others like them in a similar situation. At the same time, educational material will be developed for social professionals at homeless services nationally to prevent LGBT+ PEH from being further excluded when seeking help.

Although the pilot project pointed to serious lacks in the help system, attention to the situation for LGBT+ PEH in Denmark has grown during the project period, and several initiatives have sprung up. Our experience is that there are many social professionals who want to better themselves about the specific issues raised in this report. We look forward to contributing to that process in the new project.

“It can be a challenge to meet the needs of women who have been exposed to violence and abuse by men, and the needs of trans women who do not pass as women but who need a shielded place where they are able to live out their gender identity in a safer environment.”

# HOW BEST TO SUPPORT MALE AND TRANS\* SEX WORKERS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

A combination of stigmas over sex work, lack of official income or residence status, and experiences of homophobia and/or transphobia, often pushes LGBTQI+ sex workers into more precarious housing situations. Alias outlines how their combination approach of outreach and individualised support helps them provide safe and effective services for transgender and male sex workers. The insecure housing situation of many is exacerbated by structural elements, thus calling for the proper implementation of existing EU anti-discrimination and migration laws.



By **Mauro Striano**, Social worker, Alias, Belgium

Since 2009, Alias has been providing psycho-medico-social support in Brussels for trans persons and men having sexual relations with men in exchange for money or other services - including accommodation. The aim of Alias is to improve the well-being of these individuals, particularly through access to fundamental rights, social inclusion, the promotion of their health in the broad sense and, in particular, their sexual health. Among these fundamental rights, the issue of housing is central. The people supported by the association are confronted with the street, the absence of suitable accommodation solutions, and precarious, inadequate, or dangerous housing situations.

For 2022, we have data on the housing conditions of 134 trans persons and men having sexual relations with men in exchange for money or other services, here on out referred to as gasts.<sup>1</sup> Just over two thirds are in a situation of housing exclusion or homelessness. 49.2% are in insecure housing – i.e., staying with third parties (mainly friends or clients), in work flats, hotel rooms or Airbnbs, and including those who are threatened with eviction or are victims of domestic violence. A further 9.7% are homeless (mainly accommodated in shelters); 5.2% live on the street or in emergency accommodation; and 5.2% live in inadequate housing (in non-conventional temporary structures, squats, or in severely overcrowded conditions). 30.6% live in stable and adequate housing. Most of the beneficiaries of Alias are therefore in a situation of hidden homelessness, which is unfortunately lacking in-depth analysis and, therefore, not considered in the policy-development and the planning of services for homeless people.

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<sup>1</sup> In Alias, a beneficiary is called “gast”, which in Dutch means “guest”.

The significant proportion of gasts in a poor housing situation is linked, among other things, to the lack of official income and to a precarious administrative status. 57.6% of our beneficiaries live without an income, apart from undeclared sex work income, which is small and precarious. Regarding the administrative status, 32.9% do not have a residence permit and 21.7% are either seeking asylum or have a temporary residence permit. When we isolate the proportion of beneficiaries without a declared income or a residence permit, it is interesting to observe an increase in the proportion of people in insecure housing, rather than on the street or in homeless services.

To fully understand the reasons behind this trend, a more in-depth analysis is needed. Nevertheless, we can put forward some possible interpretations based on what we have witnessed during the provision of social support. It is particularly complicated for the public we accompany to benefit from existing services for homeless people: beyond the lack of capacity, which particularly affects people without residence permits and without income, the public of Alias is often discouraged from using emergency accommodation centres and shelters because of the obligations linked to working hours, homophobia and transphobia (particularly present in certain community contexts), and the stigma surrounding people who do sex work. It is interesting to note that only about a third of the asylum seekers we accompanied in 2022 are housed in a federal reception centre. The lack of adequate services pushes our public to find precarious and temporary accommodation solutions: with friends, when possible, but more frequently in rooms rented by the week at a very high price - which implies that a very large part of the income linked to sex work is allocated to it - or in accommodation obtained in exchange for sexual services. We also meet people who live in work flats probably connected to trafficking networks and other criminal activities, and who have no control over the clients they receive or the money they earn.

Therefore, to meet the needs of our guests, Alias has developed a broad street work consisting of outreach and individual support. It is linked to a harm reduction approach, which is characterised by several values and principles of action. Firstly, the recognition of the people involved in sex work as people in their own right, with unique backgrounds and histories, who cannot be reduced to their practice of prostitution. Secondly, an unconditional attitude of non-judgment regarding the choices and practices of the people involved. Finally, an affirmation of the right to inclusion and participation in social life for all. Anonymity and confidentiality are also fundamental for the team. All people accompanied by Alias can choose to remain completely anonymous by using a pseudonym (an alias). The “low-threshold” methodology is essential within the association. This approach translates into constant attention to lowering the thresholds of access, by reaching out and adapting to the places, times, rhythms, and life choices of the people we accompany.

Our guests can contact us for any questions and needs for support. Whenever possible, the team redirects requests to other specific services and, if asked by the person concerned, accompanies them in a variety of procedures: registration with a Public Social Welfare Centre or other public institutions to access economic and social rights; filing a complaint following an assault, sexual violence, or an episode of discrimination; opening medical rights, including requesting urgent medical assistance for irregularly-residing migrants; accessing health care, sexual health, mental health, treatment for people with problematic substance use; finding accommodation or housing; finding employment or training; filing an application for international protection and being accompanied throughout the procedure, and so on. It is also important to consider that the beneficiary does not necessarily come with a specific request. Sometimes, the simple fact of being listened to is already extremely important.

“Nonetheless, long-term solutions cannot be found without concrete structural changes that combat discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, address stigmas around sex work, create affordable housing solutions, and develop a humane migration policy.”

Despite all the efforts we put in accompanying Alias' guests, when it comes to helping people getting out of homelessness there are several structural challenges that are hard to overcome. The situation of the housing market in general has an important impact on the whole Brussels population. The lack of affordable housing excludes a significant part of the people who have the Social Integration Income (RIS) as their only source of income from the housing market. The people we support who have RIS have difficulties finding a studio - and often even a room in a shared apartment - because the prices are too high: minimum 600 Euros plus charges for studios of 25 to 40 square metres, 500 Euros for rooms. When they are willing to pay more than half of their income for housing, there are other barriers to overcome: the reluctance of house owners to rent to people who receive assistance from a Public Social Welfare Centre; the condition, sometimes imposed by owners, of proving an income equal to three times the price of the rent, which is particularly complicated for people whose income is partly undeclared; and on top of that discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Moreover, in the current context marked by a strong increase in asylum applications - in 2022, in Belgium, 36,871 people applied for international protection against 25,971 people in 2021 (an increase of 42%) - Fedasil accommodation possibilities are scarce and people who do not have access to a Fedasil centre live with third parties - like many of the people we accompany - or on the street. In evident breach to the EU Reception Conditions Directive, asylum seekers are left homeless and without an address, which entails that they cannot obtain a municipal registration certificate (also called "orange card"), and that prevents them from being able to follow training or find a job. This means that their chances of getting out of a situation of destitution are greatly reduced, sometimes leaving sex work as the only way to make ends meet.

Besides, one third of the people we accompany are in an irregular situation. For them, the lack of housing solutions is an undeniable reality. In terms of existing services, we can only refer them to emergency accommodation, which is often an inappropriate solution for people who are particularly vulnerable because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Hidden homelessness - insecure accommodation without tenancy, often in poor conditions, or sleeping in someone else's home (including work flats or clients' homes) - is often the only way to survive.

Homelessness among male and trans sex worker is a reality to which we are increasingly confronted. With time, we have improved our ways of working and put in place solid partnerships within the homelessness sector. Nonetheless, long-term solutions cannot be found without concrete structural changes that combat discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, address stigmas around sex work, create affordable housing solutions, and develop a humane migration policy. To do that the regional and national levels are not sufficient, we also need effective implementation of existing EU anti-discrimination and migration law and a more concrete EU engagement on ending homelessness.

# SUPPORTING TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN INPATIENT EMERGENCY HOUSING FACILITIES IN GERMANY

Natalie Haug discusses the challenges, and potential solutions, for the integration of trans-care into emergency housing, through the case example of the Diakonie Frankfurt and Offenbach facility: “Hannah - Living for Women”. The article expands on the process followed by the facility in opening its services to transwomen, including the establishment of guiding principles, identification of key challenges, and the adaptation of services. This case study offers a glimpse at how to offer informed and professional housing care for transgender persons.



By **Natalie Haug**, Educationalist and Social Worker,  
Diakonie Frankfurt and Offenbach, Germany

## TRANS ISSUES AS AN INCREASING PHENOMENON IN EMERGENCY HOUSING

Issues related to transgender people are becoming increasingly important for emergency housing assistance in Germany with many concrete cases arising throughout different assistance services. Indeed, the number of cases may be linked to trends identified in initial studies which point to a connection between transgender self-description and the risk of becoming homeless.<sup>1</sup>

The German system for inpatient emergency housing and emergency homeless shelters is currently organised predominantly along binary gender lines. Where transitional facilities are not structured to provide for mixed-gender accommodation, it is generally the case that those seeking assistance are distinguished according to their assigned sex, the supposedly 'natural' cis-gender,<sup>2</sup> and would be accommodated in facilities for homeless men or women as applicable.

This inevitably raises the question of how to support clients who define themselves as transgender within this system.

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1 cf. Ohms, Constance (2019): Wohnungslosigkeit und Geschlecht. Sexuelle Orientierung und Geschlechtsidentität für und in Wohnungs- und Obdachlosigkeit. Frankfurt/Main: Broken Rainbow e.V., p.12 ff.

2 The adjective cis implies the mostly present conformity of gender identity with the sex assigned at birth, commonly judged by visible physical sexual characteristics.

## A GAP IN PRINCIPLES AND GUIDANCE

Transgender people are in many cases exposed to a wide variety of personal and general social discrimination, stigma, and exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Binary-gendered emergency housing facilities run the risk of perpetuating the effects of these stigmatising and exclusionary factors if trans people are denied access to facilities corresponding with their identified gender simply because they are trans. Since there were no overarching guidelines or frameworks for handling this issue in Germany, in 2020/21 the Federal Working Group on Assistance for the Homeless (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Wohnungslosenhilfe), with the help of a group of experts from emergency housing facilities, academia, and law, set about developing recommendations for actors in emergency housing facilities.<sup>4</sup> The recommendations described possible special needs of transgender people in the field of emergency housing assistance and, at the same time, pointed out that applying generalised 'special treatment' is not always either desired or the best approach.

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3 cf. FRA – European Union Agency for fundamental rights 2013; Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes 2010, 2015, 2017

4 This recommendation for action can be found at <https://www.bagw.de/de/publikationen/pos-pap/diversitaet>

“A participatory and anti-discriminatory approach to transgender people should always be based on the individual needs and wishes of the affected transgender people themselves.”

## **PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING TRANSGENDER WOMEN IN FRANKFURT**

In the following practical example, the process of opening an inpatient emergency housing facility to transgender women is described in brief to illustrate both potential challenges and opportunities.

The Diakonie Frankfurt and Offenbach facility, “Hannah - Living for Women”, is an inpatient transitional facility to assist women dealing with exceptional social difficulties. It is divided into an inpatient area and an emergency overnight area.

In the inpatient area, homeless women can live in apartments temporarily in a setting offering social and educational assistance. In contrast, the emergency overnight area has single rooms and shared common rooms and bathroom facilities where women can stay overnight and receive counselling in acute emergency situations on a short-term basis and with a low threshold for admission.

The facility’s first encounter with transgender issues came in 2018 when a woman defining herself as transgender sought help in an inpatient setting. Due to the facilities’ structure with individual flats in the inpatient area, it was possible to admit the woman as an inpatient. However, there remained some uncertainties about the optimal way of supporting the client. Facility staff therefore sought advice from an external expert, which was found to be very helpful.

## INITIAL PRINCIPLES APPLIED TO ASSESSING TRANSGENDER ADMISSIONS

Although this initially remained an isolated case where transgender issues were at play, it led to the facility developing some principles on the admission of transgender women as follows. Admitting transgender women to the facility who are already in the transition process and are predominantly read as 'female' posed no issue thanks to the single flats in the inpatient area. In the emergency overnight stay area, admissions were viewed as infeasible due to the sanitary facilities used in common and the special need to protect the other women using the facility.

## INCREASING NUMBERS OF REQUESTS FROM TRANSGENDER WOMEN 2020-22 – FURTHER REFLECTIONS AND IDENTIFYING KEY CHALLENGES

In the course of 2020 - 2022, there were more and more admission requests from authorities, counselling centres and transgender women themselves, especially for the emergency overnight accommodation. It became clear that accessing women's facilities, especially to emergency overnight accommodation, is often difficult for transgender women seeking help. Aware of this, the staff members reflected on whether changes and alternative approaches could improve this situation.

As a result, staff arranged for an external consultant to lead an offsite seminar on the topic in the summer of 2022. Given the broad relevance of the topic, the seminar was also attended by staff members of a second residential women's facility run by the Diakonie in Frankfurt and Offenbach.

Within the framework of a reflection process, some of the main questions arising were:

- Is it possible to accommodate transgender women in the emergency overnight area? If so, how? What are the limits and who sets them?
- How can the facility support transgender women who are at the very beginning of their transition process and who have not (yet) legally formalised their gender in official documents or do not want to do so?
- How do other residents perceive and interact with the transgender women and how can they be supported and potentially make more aware of transgender issues?
- What changes are needed in how the facility is set up and its house rules?
- How do staff deal with their own uncertainties? What support do they need?
- What special requirements might there be in a residential group setting compared to single flats?

## A CASE-BY-CASE APPROACH PREFERABLE TO ENSURE RESPECTFUL AND OPTIMAL OUTCOMES

Within the seminar's open exchanges, participants indicated that they found it particularly difficult to know how to set rules on assessing transgender women's physical characteristics. For example, they found it problematic that someone would have to determine that a transgender woman seeking to be admitted was 'too masculine' or 'feminine enough'. Here it became clear that there were no clear answers to some questions (yet), but that despite some remaining uncertainty facilities could nevertheless begin to be more open to admitting transgender women.

As a result of the offsite seminar, a common consensus was found that an admission of transgender women should be made possible both in the emergency overnight stay area and in the residential group setting, and that admission should no longer be rejected as a matter of principle. The following criteria, among others, were developed for this purpose:

- The person's gender self-determination as a woman should be recognised in principle and not determined solely on the basis of official identity documents and/or physical characteristics. As with all women, including cisgender women, a decision on admission is made in the admission interview.
- If a transgender woman is admitted who is possibly still read as 'male', it is discussed with her how she herself and the staff would like to deal with possible questions from or even difficult interactions with other residents.

- The overall set-up of the facility and the house rules, which all clients have to sign upon admission, should be revised and supplemented with an express reference to the fact that the facility is a discrimination-free space.
- Staff members are offered training on the topic of gender and sexual diversity.

In the meantime, both areas of the facility have had positive experiences with the admission of transgender women. One woman was admitted to the inpatient setting, who was at the very beginning of her transition process and was largely still read as 'male'. Also in this case, after several months, the experience was positive and other residents quickly accepted her as a co-resident and recognised her identity as a woman. There were no major conflicts, and smaller issues could be dealt with in discussions with staff.

## REFORMING EXISTING SERVICES EFFECTIVE TO AVOID PERPETUATING EXCLUSION

The experience of the Diakonie facilities in Frankfurt and Offenbach shows that it may be more efficient to break with binary gender structures and ideas and integrate transgender people into existing emergency housing services instead of reproducing exclusionary structures or automatically resorting to individual placements. A participatory and anti-discriminatory approach to transgender people should always be based on the individual needs and wishes of the affected transgender people themselves. In addition, it should combine the possibilities of specific shelter on the one hand, and integration into existing services through rethinking and reflecting on existing binary gender structures on the other.

# GRASSROOT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR PREVENTING LGBTIQ+ (YOUTH) HOMELESSNESS

While there is great need for structural changes to tackle the LGBTQIA+ homelessness, Vesna Štefanec and Jan Forjan point towards the benefits of bottom-up approaches. The grassroots approach of Društvo Parada Ponosa operates through the power of community lead action. This article focuses on the ideas motivating this approach and a detailed exploration of its implementation, outlining what challenges were faced and how these were handled, and how to improve grassroots approaches in the future.



By **Vesna Štefanec**, Program Coordinator, Društvo Parada Ponosa, Slovenia and **Jan Forjan**, Student Library Assistant, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

## THE NEED FOR ADDRESSING LGBTQIA+ HOMELESSNESS

LGBTQIA+ youth are at a disproportional risk of experiencing homelessness (Morton, Dworsky & Samuels, 2017), with approximately 17% of LGBTQIA+ people surveyed across Europe experiencing housing difficulties (European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020).

Sadly, there is a lack of specialised services for LGBTQIA+ youth within organisations tackling youth homelessness in Europe, with only eight organisations reported providing such services (Shelton et al., 2020). It is also worth noting, following the report about LGBTQIA+-specific organisations across Europe (Shelton et al., 2021), that 75% of respondents report having worked with LGBTQIA+ youth experiencing homelessness. What is worrisome here is that almost two-thirds of respondents from this survey also reported a lack of organisational confidence in knowing how to support LGBTQIA+ youth experiencing homelessness.

Comparative analysis from European homeless service organisations and LGBTQIA+ focused organisations (Ritosa et al., 2021) shows that, on the one hand, non-LGBTQIA+ specific homeless service organisations face challenges such as a lack of knowledge for working with LGBTQIA+ youth and the fear of LGBTQIA+ youth potentially experiencing violence or abuse in the service if their sexual orientation or gender identity is made visible. While on the other hand, LGBTQIA+ specific organisations are reporting challenges concerning the lack of research about LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness, lack of funding to tackle the issue, a lack of infrastructure, and political and governmental support (ibid.).

These findings show us is that there is a growing and urgent need to address questions about LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness in order to provide safety and basic human rights to all people. At the same time, these reports should give us a push to create new innovative services that respond to LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness faster and more efficiently.

## GRASSROOTS APPROACH TO TACKLING LGBT YOUTH HOMELESSNESS?

One possible road forward could be grassroots organising and providing services that utilise the capacities of the local communities, and the co-creation of new bottom-up communities of support for LGBTQIA+ youth.

Staples defines grassroots community organising as a “collective action by community members drawing on the strength of numbers, participatory processes, and indigenous leadership to decrease power disparities and achieve shared goals for social change” (2004, p. 1-2). Following this definition, grassroots organising encourages us to see community members as capable of making their own decisions about social change; acknowledge that they have the right, necessity, and capacity to define their own goals and objectives; and speak and act on their own behalf. As Staples (2004) argues, people joining together under a common cause have the ability to move beyond institutional decision-making and towards a collective social change.

Our own work, following a bottom-up grassroots approach, started with making the problem of LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness visible. Firstly, our non-profit organisation Društvo Parada Ponosa conducted the first national survey in Slovenia on the prevalence of LGBTQIA+ youth home exclusion and homelessness (considering ETHOS typology) (Štefanec & Morić, 2021), through which we gathered data on which to build upon. As it turned out, nearly half of the young LGBTQIA+ people (42%, n=250) who responded did not have a home that provided physical and emotional safety. The number is possibly even higher, with our data suggesting that 78% of young people who experience housing exclusion do not recognise it as such.

Also presented in the report of the mentioned survey (Štefanec & Morić, 2021) were findings from the peer support groups focusing explicitly on the experiences of housing issues and living conditions (conducted from 2020 and 2021 as part of the Društvo Ljubljana Pride's SQVOT program for reducing the consequences of minority stress and focusing directly on LGBTQIA+ youth homelessness). Young LGBTQIA+ people have identified several problems and proposed some recommendations, such as the need for LGBTQIA+ safe houses, more affordable housing and social housing in general, recognition of LGBTQIA+ identity as a factor in attaining more points to be eligible for such housing and providing advocacy and support to young LGBTQIA+ people when communicating with landlords. Fifty-three percent of the previously mentioned survey's respondents (n=59) are forced to hide their LGBTQIA+ identity, fearing for their safety. Despite the numerous calls from different LGBTQIA+ specific Slovenian NGOs for the establishment of safe houses to provide the necessary crisis shelters and accommodations in the event of, for example, their primary caregivers disowning them, this is yet to be implemented.

Here we saw an opportunity for a community-based grassroots approach of providing (at least) the bare minimum of safe living – crisis accommodation for LGBTQIA+ youth at risk of homelessness, provided by the people in the local community.

**It should be acknowledged that these crisis accommodations provide a flexible, responsive, and immediate answer to LGBTQIA+ youth facing homelessness, by providing a safe space after the crisis occurs.”**

Pride's SQVOT program started tackling the issue by sending out a call through social media, inviting people in the local community to get together and collaboratively develop a mechanism for short-term crisis accommodation, and building a network of people capable of providing short-term housing for youth. Fifteen people from various backgrounds responded to our call, including: adult LGBTQIA+ persons with lived experiences, straight allies, and even parents of LGBTQIA+ children.

Next, we organised an introductory meeting where we presented our vision and discussed the roles of people from the community willing to collaborate. After our initial meeting, seven people decided to continue developing this work by becoming hosts and providing short-term accommodation. With the aim of making this process collaborative and participatory, we planned 4 focus groups for potential hosts where this mechanism would be instrumentalised, considering their wants, wishes, and capabilities.

In the following months, we conducted focus groups where potential hosts mapped out their common expectations, fears, and understandings concerning the housing issue for young LGBTQIA+ persons at risk of homelessness. Through four focus groups, we also tried to define what are the responsibilities of hosts and the young people staying with them. The result was a hosting protocol that we all agreed upon.

The program coordinator at Ljubljana Pride then conducted training for hosts where various important themes were addressed, ranging from a basic of understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community (while emphasising specific struggles of LGBTQIA+ homeless youth), to addressing self-care for hosts to prevent them from burning out. We

also focused on empowering hosts to react appropriately and reflecting on potential crisis situations to avoid the risk of LGBTQIA+ youth being subjected to even more harmful situations. Intensive work was done in the group but also individually with hosts to ensure all needed support from the organisation was given.

A crisis accommodation mechanism was then set in place. This new-found network of people from the local community offers the users of the SQVOT program (young LGBTQIA+ people facing homelessness), to live with the hosts for 14 days. When a young LGBTQIA+ person with a risk of homelessness reaches out to the program, the coordinator conducts an introductory meeting with the user that also involves a risk assessment. Based on the meeting, the coordinator then acts as a sort of 'matchmaker', identifying the host(s) that would, according to the specifics of the young LGBTQIA+ person in need, be the most beneficial. After that, a second meeting is conducted where all three actors involved get to know each other. A 24-hour period is then given to both, the LGBTQIA+ person and the host to make a finalised decision about the stay. If all agree, the person then stays with the host free of charge for a period of two weeks, with the informal agreement of the possibility of extension if required, with hosts providing them with food, shelter, and emotional support when needed.

The process remains collaborative throughout the whole stay, with the coordinator collaborating individually with the LGBTQIA+ person and the host. Meetings between hosts are held regularly, where they can get to know each other and exchange experiences and insights. Four times a year additional training is provided for hosts, with each addressing a different topic, some of them stemming from hosts' own unique knowledge and experience and focusing on themes important, primarily, to them.

## CONCLUSION

There remain a few limitations, that changing would improve the grassroots mechanism for LGBTQIA+ young people at risk of homelessness at hand. This includes increasing the pool of trained and informed hosts, and extending the longest stay period for young people, allowing them to truly get back on their feet and find stable long-term housing solutions. The latter should also be addressed at a systemic level, by providing stable and safe housing for all LGBTQIA+ young people at risk. The grassroots community-based housing can provide a short-term answer and can be seen as a transitional model of housing for other, more systemic responses to the housing vulnerability of the LGBTIQ+ youth. It should be acknowledged that these crisis accommodations provide a flexible, responsive, and immediate answer to LGBTQIA+ youth facing homelessness, by providing a safe space after the crisis occurs with a primary focus on training the people providing these accommodations for these specific issues, thereby not deepening the initial trauma already experienced.

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# THE RISK OF HOMELESSNESS FOR THE LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY IN POLAND

The public recognition, articulation, and understanding of LGBTQIA+ issues, including homelessness, in Poland is in its relative infancy. To fill this gap Elżbieta Szadura-Urbanska conducted research into the state of LGBTQIA+ homelessness in Poland. Building on this research, Szadura-Urbanska examines challenges such as stigma and discrimination in housing services, and their potential solutions (e.g., training flats). They convey a hopeful future for LGBTQIA+ persons experiencing homelessness in Poland, following the increase in awareness and local actions.



By **Elżbieta Szadura-Urbanska**, Psychologist and Board Member of the Brother Albert's Aid Society, Poland

Twenty-fifteen people saw the inauguration of the first hostel specifically catering to LGBTQIA+ individuals in Warsaw, financed by the Stefan Batory Foundation. Five years on, although such places have been created in several other cities, the number of services available is not enough to meet the demand.

Public awareness regarding homelessness among the LGBTQIA+ community in Poland is minimal, primarily based on the experiences of housing assistance organisations and institutions. These sources indicate that LGBTQIA+ individuals are particularly susceptible to housing instability. Additionally, there are concerns about accommodating non-binary, transgender, or intersex individuals among others, due to a lack of understanding among social workers about intersectionality and its implications, thus exacerbating exclusion within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Although there is currently no significant national-level action to address homelessness among the LGBTQIA+ community in Poland, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local governments are actively involved in this area. Local governments, in particular, have shown strong support for LGBTQIA+ individuals at risk of homelessness, with the appointment of representatives for equal treatment and the introduction of campaigns advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights in many of Poland's largest cities. Initiatives such as the 'Framework for Equal Treatment' in Gdańsk, the 'LGBT+ Declaration' in Warsaw, the

'Wrocław Declaration of Tolerance and Respect for Human Rights,' and 'Rainbow Krakow' are just a few examples of programs specifically aimed at the LGBTQIA+ community.

In pursuit of exploring this topic further, we conducted interviews with individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, as well as social workers, decision-makers in NGOs and officials responsible for local policies. The study was carried out on behalf of the National Federation for Homeless People, and its findings contribute a new perspective to the ongoing discussion on homelessness in Poland. Furthermore, the frameworks adopted were based on the 2021 research published by the Frontline Team in Fife, Scotland, supervised by Dr Briega Nugent.

According to the conducted interviews, the majority of LGBTQIA+ individuals facing housing difficulties mentioned two primary causes which occurred at different stages in their lives. Firstly, during early adulthood when they were still financially dependent, conflict with their families resulting from coming out as LGBTQIA+ had a direct impact on their housing situation. Secondly, many participants noted that their sexual orientation or gender identity negatively impacted their job security and financial stability, which further exacerbated their housing instability.

Participants in the interviews also mentioned addiction, mental illness, or incarceration as causes of their homelessness. Many of those we surveyed expressed scepticism over, or outright refuted, the effectiveness of help provided by institutions and organisations. They often experienced disregard, indifference, and oppressive rules from institution employees. Some felt that the employees were helpless in providing advice to those threatened with homelessness or already homeless and were unsure of where to send them or what permanent

addresses to indicate. However, respondents welcomed emerging initiatives, such as restaurants, cafes, and other public places labelled “LGBT-friendly” or “gay-friendly”, the actions of local governments, the appointment of equality representatives, and the emergence of new places across Poland where fundamental needs can be met.

In 2019, Kosma Kołodziej conducted research on a sample of nearly 500 LGBTQIA+ individuals up to the age of 25, which confirmed that episodes of homelessness often occurred after individuals disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity. Unfortunately, it is a common practice to kick out young people who identify as LGBTQIA+. The report ‘Social Situation of LGBTQA People in Poland,’ prepared by the Campaign Against Homophobia and Lambda, shows that 16.5% of the surveyed individuals from this community have experienced at least one episode of homelessness, with being thrown out of the house

or running away due to family conflicts as common reasons. Trans people are at particular risk of being evicted from their family homes and, subsequently, becoming homeless.

According to our study, employees of institutions working with homeless people have limited knowledge of the needs of the LGBTIAQ+ community. The survey results indicate that only about 43% of respondents have provided support to bisexual and homosexual people, and an even smaller group of about 23% have provided support to transgender people. While most employees claim to have no issues providing assistance to the first group, more than 59% of them would feel uncomfortable assisting transgender individuals. In general, 62% of employees do not know where to direct LGBT+ people to receive adequate support, and almost 75% of respondents expect training in this area.

“There are concerns about accommodating non-binary, transgender, or intersex individuals among others, due to a lack of understanding among social workers about intersectionality and its implications, thus exacerbating exclusion within the LGBTQIA+ community.”

As of now, there are approximately seventy NGOs in Poland providing support to LGBTQIA+ individuals, with a significant number located in smaller cities and towns, such as Piła or Konin. Some of these organisations offer housing assistance specifically for transgender and non-heterosexual individuals, typically through hostels and transitional training flats. In response to the ongoing war in Ukraine, some of these organisations have also started accepting refugees.

Representatives from these NGOs highlight the particularly challenging situation faced by transgender and non-binary individuals seeking access to shelters. The difficulties begin with the admission process for low-threshold assistance facilities, such as night shelters, where placement must be consistent with the gender recorded on official documents.

Would better access to housing be a good solution? Considerably so - both in the form of housing programmes aimed directly at the LGBTQIA+ community, and general access. Transition training flats can usually accommodate a few people and, as our interviewees noted, they are primarily used by young people. The greater availability of these flats for LGBTQIA+ people up to the age of 25 or 29 is due to the availability that NGOs have. The emphasis on the young is simply due to market needs. One of the charities, which runs training flats for young people in general, claims that young LGBTQIA+ individuals constitute almost 50% of the applicants.

What about the housing needs of the LGBTQIA+ elderly then? It appears that such people are almost invisible within the system. There are no special programs targeting them specifically, and even if they are given a chance at being placed into the above-mentioned training flats, they may easily become targets for harassment and violence. According to our research, the optimal solution for elderly LGBTQIA+ individuals would be a housing scheme similar to the Housing First scheme, which has been recently implemented across several Polish cities.

Those running the organisations see the need for LGBTQIA+ people in the crisis of homelessness to use support tools other than just housing assistance. They also recognise the difficulties in doing so. Both on the part of LGBTQIA+ people, who are not always willing to take advantage of the free consultations with a psychologist, therapist, or vocational counsellor available in various projects, and on the part of professionals. Not all professionals are prepared to accommodate the needs of LGBTQIA+ people and not all of them speak an inclusive language. Furthermore, it appears that within large organisations that are open to everyone in need, this problem is not strongly recognised; the overtone of statements by decision-makers in these organisations leads one to conclude that it is enough to just be tolerant of differences in order to help effectively. While representatives of NGOs specialising in helping LGBTQIA+ people argue that there is no effective help without recognising the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals.



It has only been in the last few years that the articulation of the needs within the LGBTQIA+ community, including those facing homelessness, has appeared in the social discourse. Therefore, most cities are in the early stages of creating, implementing, and managing projects specifically targeting LGBTQIA+ people. For example, the first edition of Warsaw's pilot on 'Organising a 24-hour shelter and intervention centre for people of different sexual identities in the form of transition training flats' will end this year.

In turn, the practices of the LGBTQIA+ youth intervention housing project implemented by the Gdańsk Foundation will contribute to the development of standards for LGBT+ friendly services. Guidance for the conduct of housing support for LGBT+ is also to be expected this year following the evaluation of the 'Gdańsk Social Housing Programme'. The Poznan initiative (implemented with city funds) on housing schemes for LGBT+ people experiencing violence also demonstrates an intersectional understanding.

Lastly, it should be noted that LGBTQIA+ individuals themselves have noticed positive changes in terms of accessing accommodation. Another important aspect is the role of the media, particularly those outlets that are supportive of the LGBTQIA+ community. In June 2022, there were a remarkable 700 pieces of content related to this community, which represents a 200% increase from the previous month. Although June is a significant month for LGBTQIA+, which may have resulted in greater interest in the topic, our interviewees suggest that they find the media, especially the internet, to be a valuable source of information on shelters and other useful resources.

# REFUGE BRUXELLES: BECAUSE IT'S NEEDED

Refuge Bruxelles outline their campaign for a comprehensive study into LGBTQIA+ homelessness in Europe. Refuge Bruxelles present this research as the opportunity to gain a much-needed understanding of the scale of the issue, and the intersectionality of the vulnerabilities of LGBTQI+ persons experiencing homelessness. This research would allow for greater, more productive action and the enhancement of protective measures for LGBTQIA+ persons experiencing homelessness, providing qualitative data to draw upon.



By **Marc Bouteiller**, Director, Refuge Bruxelles, Belgium

Refuge Bruxelles provides accommodation and support for young adults aged between 18 and 25 who are experiencing exclusion because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Since its official launch in 2018, the organisation has seen an exponential growth in demand that it cannot fully meet. In 2022, 32 young people were accommodated and 143 received support (mainly with looking for housing). For every request for accommodation it accepts, Refuge Bruxelles must unfortunately refuse a dozen others.

The UN has been looking into the issue of LGBTQIA+ people who sleep rough and the situation in some countries is of real concern.

In the United States, it is estimated that 40% of the 500,000 people sleeping rough identify as LGBTQIA+. This situation is not new; the first doctors to take an interest in the issue of homosexuality – in the 19th century – already recognised that male homosexuals made up a large part of the homeless population.

In Canada, the work of Dr Abramovich has already reported that 40% of homeless young people identify as LGBTQIA+, and that the number of young people from this community living either outdoors, in a vehicle, or in an empty building, has grown from 13% to 33% since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to UK organisations [Stonewall Housing](#) and [The Albert Kennedy Trust](#), the situation in England in 2016 was “dramatic”. The total number of LGBTQIA+ persons who had been rejected by their homophobic family was almost 48,000 in the United Kingdom, constituting 24% of the homeless population of the country. These figures have certainly not improved since the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis. England fears the same explosion in numbers seen in Canada.

In 2020, the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) published a piece of research estimating that in the European Union, one-in-five LGBTQIA+ people had experienced homelessness. This figure was higher for trans people, at one-in-three, and intersex people, at one-in-four. The FRA also said that the lack of institutional support, rejection by society, and family disputes linked to questions around identity and gender were the main reasons for homelessness among LGBTQIA+ people. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic, which deepened socio-economic inequality and heightened anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric, increased homelessness within communities, especially among young people.

In Belgium, little or no data is collected. The interfederal (national) centre for equal opportunities, Unia, explains that the methods used to count the number of people sleeping rough attempt to be as unintrusive as possible regarding their personal lives. Although this is a noble intention, it may actually risk making the issue even less visible, and subsequently cement adverse effects.



“Discrimination brings with it exclusion, homelessness, sex work as a survival mechanism, manifold addictions and, ultimately, serious physical and mental health problems, which too often sadly lead to suicide.”

Indeed, Refuge Bruxelles and its partners working on the ground in Belgium know that discrimination works in similar ways whichever country you are in. Discrimination brings with it exclusion, homelessness, sex work as a survival mechanism, manifold addictions and, ultimately, serious physical and mental health problems, which too often sadly lead to suicide.

*Alias*, the organisation that provides support for the mental and physical health and social inclusion of men working as sex workers in Brussels, highlights that a large number of male sex workers are homeless.

Young LGBTQIA+ people are more affected by suicide and addiction. The figures vary and, again, are not available for Belgium. We can, nevertheless, give an idea: according to the *Centre de ressources sur la prévention du suicide* (suicide prevention resource hub), the suicide rate is 1.5 to 3 times higher among LGBTQIA+ young people than among heterosexual young people - a Canadian study estimates that the rate is 12 times higher!

LGBTQIA+ people are also more often the victims of verbal and physical abuse than the rest of the population (in mainland France, 53% of LGBTQIA+ people have been subjected to insults, ridicule, or physical assault in their lifetime), but are also faced with a lack of knowledge and understanding from healthcare services and schools.

The personal impact varies of this; it might just be a feeling of alienation, but it can also mean fear, long-term physical and mental health problems, and suicidal ideation that may or may not be acted upon. The risk of experiencing financial hardship is higher for these young people too.

Unfortunately for *Refuge Bruxelles*, the data collected originates primarily from Anglo-Saxon countries. This absence of research and data collection in Europe plays a large part in its minimisation. At the same time, we cannot reliably prove that the situation is less alarming in the European Union and mainland Europe.

The 2021-24 national action plan for a more LGBTQI+ friendly Belgium realises that this is an important topic and there has been a considerable increase in research into LGBTQI+ issues in recent years. However, the diversity of the LGBTQI+ community makes it difficult to paint a one-size-fits-all picture of the different issues. It is therefore very important to carry out more qualitative research into the living situation of LGBTQI+ people.

The plan thus points to two concrete actions that are needed: to carry out a study into the accommodation options for LGBTQI+ people in need of international protection, and commission research on a priority theme chosen in consultation with civil society.

*Refuge Bruxelles* campaigns for comprehensive research to be carried out in Europe in order to give shape to the issue of LGBTQI+ homelessness, which has been exacerbated these past few years by the healthcare crisis associated with Covid-19 and the crisis linked to the war in Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis has brought to light the issue of LGBTQIA+ migration, and the flow of migrants from Ukraine into Poland, Hungary and Romania has underlined the urgent need to take the LGBTQIA+ dimension of migration into consideration.

But the scale of the problem is not the whole story. We also need to consider the extreme vulnerability of this community.

Rape, murder, lynching and different types of physical assault are unfortunately the reality they face.

Even though Belgium can boast of one of the most progressive legal systems, the murder of Ihsane Jarfi in Liege and the homophobic murder in Beveren in 2021 remind us that unfortunately the law does not shape people's mindsets.

*Refuge Bruxelles* thus campaigns for, in addition to a recognition of the scale of the phenomenon, an expansion of the measures available to protect these communities. These protective measures must be able to serve all groups subject to this violence, whatever their age (minors or adults) and whatever their immigration status (including those in need of international protection or those who are undocumented). These measures must be able to respond to emergency situations as well as allowing for structured support over the medium- and long-term.

In its 2021 final report on the improvement of data collection around equal opportunities in Belgium (*Improving Equality Data Collection*), *Unia* recommends the use of a data hub and for the collection of up-to-date data.

We know this is needed. *Refuge Bruxelles* wants to establish a tool to capture the realities faced on the ground - primarily to quantify the problem, but also to provide qualitative information on it.

*Refuge Bruxelles* aims to implement the recommendations by *Unia* that ensure that this data collection can take place, such as: following the law around the protection of personal data at all stages of data processing; coproduction with the communities affected; specifying the purpose of collecting the data and the methodology used to collect it; as well as respecting the principles of transparency and accountability.

Qualitative research will also allow for a better grasp of the intersectional nature of issues linked to discrimination.

Confident in the value of our frontline experience since 2018 and convinced as we are that the number of young people supported by *Refuge Bruxelles* will provide a benchmark to start from, we call on the public authorities to support the implementation of this study, which would allow us to put in place statistical tools useful for research at the regional, national, and European levels. These tools should be fit for the future and allow us to keep track of our target group over the long term.

This research would allow us to identify indicators among our target population that would help us to gauge their vulnerabilities. The fact that these vulnerabilities are multiple means an in-depth analysis of the intersectionality of these vulnerabilities is needed, and that there must be tailored tools to analyse and provide responses to it.

It is our hope that the political authorities, at whichever level of influence, will therefore promote this type of tool, which would allow them to refine the response to the issue we face.

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# IN THEIR OWN WORDS: MOMO'S EXPERIENCE OF LGBTQ+ HOMELESSNESS

Feantsa had the opportunity to interview Momo, a user of Le Refuge, a homeless centre focusing on helping LGBTQ+ individuals in Brussels. The interview discusses Momo's experience of homelessness, from the causes of their homelessness, mistreatment they experienced within an asylum centre, and what makes services like Le Refuge safe and effective. We are incredibly thankful to Momo for sharing their story, so we may all identify shortcomings and strengths within homeless services when providing support for LGBTQ+ individuals.



Interview conducted by **Marc Bouteiller**, Director of Refuge Bruxelles, Belgium, on behalf of FEANTSA, with Momo, a resident of Le Refuge, Bruxelles

**FEANTSA:** Can you tell us about yourself and outline some of the causes behind you becoming homeless?

**Momo:** My name is Momo, I'm a 22-year-old Palestinian seeking asylum in Belgium. Upon my arrival, I had to apply for asylum in Belgium for fear of persecution due to my sexual orientation back in my home country (Lebanon). I am gay and gender fluid, and I like to express my fluidity with makeup and feminine clothes. Fortunately, I haven't experienced a long period of homelessness, but I have lived many days on the streets seeking a place to sleep.

**FEANTSA:** What has your experience of homelessness services been like? What additional challenges did you face as an LGBTIQ person, compared to heterosexual or cisgendered people experiencing homelessness?

**Momo:** I was admitted to an asylum centre. As much as it was relieving to be there, it was equally hard due to my sexuality. I had to live with people who had the same mentality as those that caused me to run from my country, and the centre was not very educated about homosexuality and gender fluidity.

I was placed with individuals who constantly harassed, mocked, and insulted me, until I was separated into a room alone where I really felt like I was trapped. Long story short, the experience was bad; it took a toll on my mental health and I went into a severe depression. In the end, I was beaten up by a guy in the centre. Eventually, the centre contacted Le Refuge Brussels to take me in due to the problems that I was experiencing in there. The discrimination I received from the people living at the centre was too much to take. I received too much harassment, and the fact that the majority of staff were not educated enough on the LGBTIQ+ situation didn't help at all, especially when I used to dress up as a girl and the boys would come and touch me in places that were inappropriate.

**FEANTSA:** Have you had positive experiences in homelessness services?

**Momo:** Moving to Le Refuge Brussels changed my life, literally. The amount of love I received is beyond imaginable, and this organisation is like a literal family to me. The assistance they offered, the follow ups, and the accommodation with people who belong to the same community made me feel very safe and I started developing and my mental health has improved. I would also like to highlight that my sister was admitted to Le Refuge Brussels and, because of their support, we are able to seek psychological help and support for the traumatic experiences we have lived through.

**FEANTSA:** Where do you feel safe? What makes a place feel safe?

**Momo:** Feeling safe is so important! Feeling at peace is what every human being seeks, and it is so valuable to have your freedom and act however you feel! Being myself and acting as myself is a freedom! Being able to express what I want is freedom! Not being judged based on my sexuality and preferences is a freedom and, above all, being surrounded by a family who cares about my mental health and about my progress is a freedom; this is what makes a person feel safe and at peace. The feeling of being protected is what makes a person feel safe.

**FEANTSA:** What would help support you to exit homelessness?

**Momo:** What would help any person to exit homelessness is the right information and direction! You can help people move forward in the right direction by informing them about alternatives (jobs, institutions, volunteering, etc.) - anything that could make them feel productive again and help them earn money so they can rebuild their life that has been crushed due to hardship!

**FEANTSA:** *Does your experience of homelessness impact on your relationship with the wider LGBTIQ community?*

**Momo:** My relationship with homelessness has of course made me closer to my community because we can have similar experiences (especially when talking with people who were in the same situation). It has brought us together, taught us to stand by and be there for each other, because, no matter how hard life gets, no one will understand your pain except the people who lived the same experience!

**FEANTSA:** *Beyond exiting homelessness, what are your hopes and dreams for the future?*

**Momo:** My dream is to reach a point in my life where I feel like I'm protected and safe. My main goal now is to try and resolve all the traumatic experiences that I have been through by seeking psychological help. I want to live in peace, and I hope that one day people will understand that we do not choose our sexuality and that it is not wrong to love whoever you want! Homophobia, transphobia, and any kind of phobia towards our community should be stopped for good!

**FEANTSA:** *This magazine is addressed to people who work in the homeless sector, either in delivering services or making policies, what message do you have for them? What would you like to them to take away?*

**Momo:** I would like to thank everyone for their support and assistance in helping homeless people! You are so precious, and we are forever grateful for your help and support. Please, whether dealing with people from the LGBTQ community or otherwise, keep in mind that these

people did not choose to be homeless or left in the street, and that their mental health is already devastated. Please start from their position, through talking to them and letting them open to you! Be their brothers and sisters and assure them that it is only a matter of time and that everything will be okay!

Also please take the chance to attend some awareness campaigns about the LGBTQ+ community if you don't have much knowledge about it. It would help you a lot to understand everyone's situation and will make the other person more comfortable talking to you if they can consider you an ally.

One example: being gender fluid I sometimes feel like I'm a girl, but in the asylum centre they put me with men. I felt like shit dressing up like a girl while being put in a room with guys. It made me feel so low - to the point where I had a mental breakdown because no one had any idea about my situation or what gender fluid meant, in a time where I really needed someone to understand what I was going through.



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