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Child Welfare Systems and LGBTQ Youth Homelessness: Gender Segregation, Instability, and Intersectionality

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This study documents the child welfare experiences of youth who are LGBTQ and their perspectives on how these experiences influenced their housing instability and homelessness. Youth detailed incidents of gender segregation, stigmatization, isolation, and institutionalization in child welfare systems that they linked to their gender expression and sexuality, which often intersected with being a youth of color. The youth described these incidents as contributing to multiple placements and shaping why they experienced homelessness.

Annually, around 1.6 to 2 million youth, aged 12 to 24 years old, experience homelessness each year in the United States (Gibson, 2011; Karabanow, 2004; Witkin et al., 2005). Youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) are estimated to make up at least 40% of this population of youth experiencing homelessness, despite being about 5–8% of the general U.S. youth population (Durso and Gates, 2012; Ray, 2006). A main pathway into youth homelessness is aging out of government programs (Gibson, 2011; Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010), and youth who are LGBTQ may also be over-represented within child welfare systems (Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). A 2014 report found that almost 20% of youth in Los Angeles child welfare systems identified as LGBTQ (Wilson, Cooper, Kastanis, & Nezhad, 2014).

Given these findings, I ask: *How do youth who are LGBTQ and are experiencing homelessness perceive how child welfare systems shaped their pathways into homelessness?* To address this question, this study presents qualitative findings from youth who are LGBTQ and experiencing homelessness to document their accounts of being in child welfare systems. I specifically attend to the ways in which the youth discussed how their gender expression and its intersections with sexuality and race shaped experiences of gender segregation and instability within child welfare systems and how these experiences may contribute to experiencing homelessness.

Background

Youth who are LGBTQ are likely to experience multiple placements while in child welfare systems and to be placed in congregate care settings (Elze, 2014; Mallon, Aledort, & Ferrera, 2002). Congregate care settings are often unsafe for youth who are LGBTQ, whereby they are susceptible to victimization (Elze, 2014; Marksamer, 2011). Youth in congregate care are also less likely to achieve placement permanency (Elze, 2014; Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006). In effect, multiple placements and experiences of instability may contribute to some youth who are

LGBTQ to run away from child welfare systems or to not have a place to stay when they age out of care.

Notably, youth who are transgender and/or gender-expansive often have a difficult time in child welfare systems. Violence enacted upon people who are LGBTQ is often not because they are “out” as LGBTQ, but because service providers, caretakers, and peers are policing the youth’s gender behaviors (Keuroghlian, Shtasel, & Bassuk, 2014; Saewyc et al., 2006). Mental health treatments and other behavior modifications may be used against youth who are transgender and gender-expansive as a way to try to modify their gender expression (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006; Marksamer, 2011). Youth of color who are transgender and gender-expansive face compounding stressors and experiences of discrimination within child welfare systems, whereby racism and racial profiling can shape how some youth’s behaviors, including their gender behaviors, are monitored and disciplined (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006).

Furthermore, life in foster homes may be unsafe for youth who are LGBTQ. In a focus group study conducted with 25 foster parents, the foster parent participants feared that an LGB-identifying foster child could make the other children in the house non-heterosexual and/or would molest other children (Clements & Rosenwald, 2007). Some foster parents held heterosexist beliefs, and almost every foster parent in the study had the child removed once they found out that the child was non-heterosexual. Heterosexism and other biases against children who are LGBTQ and are in foster homes can lead to youth experiencing multiple placements and being placed in group homes or residential facilities (Clements & Rosenwald, 2007; Wilson & Kastanis, 2015). Youth who are LGBTQ may choose the “safety” of the streets over foster homes and other placements (Forge & Ream, 2014).

Many of the ideas about and treatment toward youth who are LGBTQ and are in child welfare systems can be situated within the larger U.S. social context, wherein stereotypes about and discrimination against people who are LGBTQ influence experiences and outcomes (Mallon & Woronoff, 2006; Nolan, 2006). “Heteronormativity”

describes how social norms, discourses, and practices construct heterosexuality as superior to all other expressions of sexuality (Warner, 1993). Within a heteronormative society, the gender expressions of men as masculine and women as feminine are naturalized and given preference. Many everyday experiences of discrimination among people who are non-heterosexual are because of their gender presentation and behaviors, whereby biases toward certain forms of gender expression are associated with anti-gay biases (Gordon & Meyer, 2008). Cisgenderism, the practice that systematically discriminates against and denies the existence of people whose gender identities and expressions do not align with the gender they were assigned at birth (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012), also shapes differential treatment against youth whose lives challenge the gender binary.

Significantly, “intersectionality” was coined to document how social categories intersect and shape people’s experiences differently (Crenshaw, 1991). People of color and/or people of low income or who are poor experience heterosexism and anti-trans biases differently, as discrimination based on gender and sexuality intersects with racial and class inequality. Furthermore, youth of color, especially children and youth from families that are financially strained, are disproportionately represented within child welfare systems (Roberts, 2003; Wilson, Cooper, Kastanis, & Nezhad, 2014). Given these disparities, attending to the ways in which race and class intersect with gender and sexuality is crucial to understanding how youth who are LGBTQ and are experiencing homelessness perceive their experiences within child welfare systems.

Methods

This project is a multi-site ethnography on homelessness among youth who are LGBTQ, conducted primarily at two organizations that provide services to youth experiencing homelessness in central Texas. From January 2015 to June 2016, the researcher volunteered weekly at a drop-in center for youth experiencing homelessness and at a shelter for youth who are LGBTQ and are experiencing homelessness. The researcher

conducted 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with youth who are LGBTQ and are experiencing homelessness. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded, lasted around an hour, and took place in person. The interviews were conducted where the youth chose to be interviewed, mainly in private settings. The youth who were interviewed voluntarily agreed and were informed about all processes of consent. All names have been changed for confidentiality.

The majority of the youth were recruited through the two field sites, though four youth came from a transitional living program associated with the drop-in center and two youth came from a Child Protective Services (CPS) licensed shelter. The interviews covered four main topics: the youth's perceived pathways into homelessness, the present needs of the youth, their resiliency, and their everyday experiences. At the end of each interview, the youth stated their demographic characteristics. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, only one youth declined to be interviewed, possibly because of a lack of rapport, as the researcher only met the youth once.

The researcher transcribed each interview and then uploaded all field notes and interview transcriptions into MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. The transcriptions and field notes were coded following a grounded theory approach. The researcher coded the data by first attaching labels to segments of the data, describing what each segment is about. Eighty-one initial themes were developed. The researcher also wrote memos to interpret themes within the data. Focused coding was then implemented to move the analysis to a more conceptual level, which included the over-arching themes: gender expression, sexuality, child welfare systems, segregation, violence and abuse, and instability. These themes came through an inductive approach of analyzing the data. Finally, the researcher did axial coding to identify the relationship between the focused codes (Charmaz, 2006). The validity of the findings were confirmed through prolonged engagement in the field and through member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000), whereby the researcher discussed the emerging findings with the youth and with the service providers at the field sites to confirm their credibility.

Findings

In this study, one youth was 17, two were 25, and the rest were 18 to 24 years old. Ten youth identified as non-Hispanic white, ten identified as black, 14 identified as Hispanic and/or Latina/o, three identified as white Hispanic, one identified as black Hispanic, one identified as black, Mexican, and white, and one identified as mixed. Six youth identified as lesbians, eight (youth who identified as transgender) identified as heterosexual, ten identified as gay, 12 identified as bisexual, two identified as pansexual, one identified as “kind of everything,” and one identified as “attracted to transgender women.” One youth identified as a non-binary transguy, one identified as a trans man, two identified as gender-fluid, seven identified as transgender women, 14 identified as men, and 15 identified as women. Many youth were from Texas, though some were from other parts of the South, and some came from other places such as California.

Twenty-one of the 40 youth mentioned being in child welfare systems at some point during their childhood; the findings presented are based on these 21 youth’s accounts. Some youth entered the child welfare system during childhood, while other youth entered during their teenage years. Almost all of the youth discussed having multiple placements. Many youth aged out, some left before aging out, and a couple youth were adopted, though reported familial conflict within their new family. Several themes connected many of the youth’s narratives, even though there was a variety of involvement within child welfare systems.

Many youth detailed child welfare system experiences of gender segregation, stigmatization, isolation, and institutionalization that they often linked to their gender expression and sexuality, which often intersected with being a youth of color. The youth described these incidents as contributing to multiple placements within child welfare systems. Some of the youth reported that these experiences of instability led to their running away from placements and/or not having a place to go upon aging out, potentially influencing the reasons they were experiencing homelessness. Overall, many youth discussed how the gender segregation of child welfare placements negatively influenced their experiences

in child welfare systems. This gender segregation was specifically linked to issues of stigmatization, isolation, and institutionalization.

Stigmatization

Gender segregation was reported as contributing to a sense of stigmatization as well as denying some youth respect and acceptance for their identity. For example, Trinity, a 20-year-old white gender-expansive lesbian, talked about why she ran away from a CPS-licensed emergency shelter. She stated, “The shelter was divided—girl-side, boy-side. [...] I was like going on 16 years old, and the staff said I could not talk to any of the little girls like 13 and under.” Trinity continued, “And the reason being is because I was gay. Because they thought I would do something to them, which made no fucking sense ‘cause I never showed any history of that kind of crap.” Trinity concluded, “But it made it seem like I was a pedo[phile], and it made me feel very disgusted with the place.”

Justice, an 18-year-old black heterosexual transgender woman, also told me:

Basically, I was in foster care, and the placement where I was at, they weren’t providing me some of the things that I needed being transgender. Placing me in the wrong dorm. Misgendering me a lot of times. They would deny me a lot of basic rights.

For Trinity, the gender segregation and further stigmatization of feeling like being seen as a pedophile led her to run away from the CPS shelter and begin experiencing homelessness on the streets at 16 years of age. Being denied proper placements, being misgendered, and being denied basic rights, Justice left CPS for the streets when she turned 18 years old.

Isolation

Gender segregation was discussed as a form of isolation that also contributed to being marked as different. Furthermore, gender segregation does not account for people’s intersecting identities and needs. Xander,

a 19-year-old black, gender-expansive, gay youth, who was residing at a CPS-licensed shelter, told me about a previous shelter where he once stayed. He stated, “I was gay. They didn’t want anyone around me. I wasn’t allowed to be with the boys, and obviously, I wasn’t allowed to be with the girls.” Eventually, he got put on a 30-day notice, and staff members at the shelter evicted him. When I inquired why, Xander said another guy “was throwing caramel in my hair. My hair is one of my trigger points.” Xander said he stabbed the boy “in the balls with my [hair] pick.”

Talking about the loneliness of being in child welfare systems, Xander told me, “I felt like I really had no one. I didn’t even have my fellow CPS children. [...] When you’re LGBTQ in CPS, even then to the kids, you’re an anomaly. You’re weird.” Giving a specific example, Xander detailed,

I felt like a zoo animal put on stage around those kids, just ‘cause I was the only gay dude. ‘What’s it like being gay? Are you a male or female?’ To this day, I don’t even say I have anyone on my side. Creole community, black community, LGBTQ—I never feel like I fit in, because even amidst them, I have to deal with the fact that I’m a CPS child. Oh ‘cause you’re black, you’re one of us. ‘Cause you’re gay, you belong in this LGBTQ group. I don’t feel like I truly belong. I don’t. There are times I question my humanity because of that. It has gotten to the point where I have no self-esteem.

Being gay and black may have made Xander uniquely targeted in being bullied, as Xander linked his experiences of bullying to his hair. In fighting back, Xander experienced instability and further placements, as staff removed Xander from this shelter and sent him to another one. Likewise, for Xander, the intersections of his identities as black, LGBTQ, and a CPS child were never fully embraced and accepted in child welfare systems or in society.

Institutionalization

Other youth detailed experiencing gender segregation and institutionalization in residential treatment centers (RTCs) and psychiatric

hospitals. Adelpha, an 18-year-old heterosexual transgender woman, who identified as black, Mexican, and white, detailed:

They locked me up in a RTC for six months in the middle of nowhere, and it's basically this boot camp for CPS kids. And they treat—literally, it is worse than prison. [...] I started wearing makeup and dressing really feminine [at the RTC]. And they were like—they would come up to me, and they were like, “You need to stop that. This isn't Dallas.” They would make me take off my makeup. And then I was trying to grow out my hair there. And somebody would be there everyday, well not everyday, but I think it was every month to cut hair, 'cause everybody had like a buzz cut. I was like, “No, I'm not cutting my hair.”

Perhaps paradoxically, the gender segregation of child welfare systems is how Adelpha met someone who was transgender. Adelpha told me, “I met this trans woman, and she was in CPS too. I didn't know she was transgender, 'cause I didn't know nothing about that.” Adelpha went on:

I was like, who are you living with 'cause there was a whole bunch of different CPS kids in different foster homes. She was like, “Oh, those guys over there.” And I was like, “Oh, I didn't know girls and guys could be in the same foster homes together.”

When the other person told Adelpha they were transgender, Adelpha said she replied by stating, “I kind of feel that way too.”

The six youth in this study who discussed spending time in RTCs all described them as institutionalized prison-like facilities. Adelpha's gender expression was regulated at this boot camp. Adelpha, though, met a youth who identified as transgender, which Adelpha said allowed her to explore her gender identity more after Adelpha's caseworker dropped Adelpha off at homeless shelter for 18–21 year olds when Adelpha aged out of CPS.

Lastly, Alaina, a 19-year-old white Hispanic woman who identified as a gender-expansive lesbian, discussed how her gender expression and sexuality shaped her experiences in child welfare systems. Alaina said one foster family she was with “would get mad, 'cause I liked boy stuff.

I just liked a lot of boy stuff, and they would force me to wear girl stuff—Barbies and all that. And I just didn't want to—that just wasn't me." Alaina went to a new placement where the family "let me kind of explore, I guess, what I wanted to be or something like that. I ended up dressing like a boy, going to school, doing all that. I ended up feeling a certain way towards a female." Alaina thought liking females "was so wrong," but the foster parent told Alaina that "it's something you can't control. She pretty much taught me how to be the way I am, and to feel better about myself." At some point though, Alaina had to leave that placement and go to another foster home. At this new home, Alaina said:

[the foster mom] did not agree with the tomboy lifestyle. She just did not. And it was hard for me there because she always locked me in a room, 'cause I was gay. And I would always say that. And then eventually, I just took off and ran away.

At another point, Alaina went back to this foster parent. However, Alaina noted that, "She didn't want me there, 'cause I was with a girl still. So she didn't want me there, so she ended up putting me in a hospital in Dallas."

Some youth noted how child welfare systems were a contradictory space. For example, Alaina said she experienced discrimination because of her gender expression and sexuality from many foster parents, though one foster home helped her to accept herself. Nonetheless, Alaina left when she was not accepted and was sent to a psychiatric hospital because of her sexuality. Some youth reported that if a foster parent(s) does not want a child anymore, the foster parent(s) must give a 30-day notice to the Department of Family and Protective Services; however, to bypass keeping the child for 30 days, the foster parent(s) can send the youth to a mental hospital. Alaina ran away from many of her placements while growing up, and she was currently residing at the LGBTQ shelter until her caseworker could get her into a transitional living program for youth formerly involved in CPS.

Discussion and Implications

Similar to Shelton's (2015) study on the programmatic barriers that youth who are transgender and gender-expansive and are experiencing homelessness encounter, this study shows how child welfare systems are often shaped around and uphold cisgenderism. Cisgenderism in child welfare systems can take many forms. This cisgenderism includes, for example, segregating youth based on gender in shelters and other placements, isolating youth who are transgender and gender-expansive, misgendering youth, trying to suppress their gender expressions, and labeling and stereotyping youth who are or are perceived to be LGBTQ. Cisgenderism may also result in evicting youth who are transgender, non-heterosexual, and/or gender-expansive or sending them to mental hospitals, RTCs, and other institutions, and acting in ways that limit permanency for the youth.

A main way in which cisgenderism impacted many of the youth in this study was through the gender segregation of CPS placements. Gender segregation is a form of systemic oppression that can also be experienced as a microaggression through being misgendered. The wrong housing placement can potentially expose youth who are transgender and gender-expansive to other forms of violence that they could encounter within gender segregated spaces. Negative stereotypes about people who are LGBTQ, such as being "sexual predators," could stigmatize youth who are LGBTQ and prevent them from being allowed to interact with other youth. Making a person who identifies as LGBTQ room by themselves could be a way to protect them, but this isolation can further notions that they are different.

The discrimination toward expansive expressions of gender marked the lives of youth in this study more than necessarily being "out" as LGBTQ. In U.S. society, there has often been a conflation of gender expression with sexuality, for if a person does not enact and embody gender expressions that are in line with stereotypical expectations for the gender they were assigned at birth, one is seen as challenging both heteronormativity and the gender binary. As child welfare systems

often uphold the gender binary, they also uphold heteronormativity, whereby people who are non-heterosexual are also stereotyped, isolated, targeted, and kicked out of shelters and foster homes.

Furthermore, the youth of color in this study may have their gender expression and behaviors monitored in specific ways. Youth of color may be more likely to be in congregate care settings, in RTCs, and in other public settings such as mental hospitals and emergency shelters. The institutionalized prison-like experience of RTCs can tell youth that they are criminals, which can be further exacerbated if one is a youth of color, who may already be stereotyped, seen, and treated as a criminal. Violence, heterosexism, and transbias are potentially more frequent in public settings (Meyer, 2015), and placement permanency is often harder to achieve when youth are in out-of-home care (Freundlich & Avery, 2005). Stereotypes about people of color as criminals and/or hypersexual, along with racial profiling, can shape the monitoring and disciplining of youth of color who are LGBTQ (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006; Ritchie, Mogul, & Whitlock, 2011). Systems are often not built to accommodate intersecting identities and experiences, and youth of color who are LGBTQ may be detrimentally impacted, especially in achieving placement permanency, by these systemic shortcomings.

One way to respond to systemic shortcomings is through implementing policies that are LGBTQ-affirming. In Texas, there are no policies in place to treat people according to their self-identified gender while in CPS. Likewise, nothing in the Texas residential childcare contracts addresses children who are LGBTQ. However, youth in state custody legally have the right to safety, protection from abuse, prevention of harm, and equal protection (Estrada & Marksamer, 2006; Mallon & Woronoff, 2006). Therefore, specific policies that are LGBTQ-affirming need to be implemented to protect and treat people equitably based on their self-identified gender, to house youth where they want to be housed, and to provide safety and specialized care for youth who are LGBTQ.

Furthermore, gender segregation of housing needs to be reexamined, as gender segregation can uphold cisgenderism and heteronormativity,

marginalizing youth who are LGBTQ and are in care. In upholding the gender binary, gender segregation erases people who do not identify and/or are not within this binary. In turn, shelters and housing specifically for youth who are LGBTQ may be ideal for some youth, though other youth who are LGBTQ may prefer being integrated into and part of programs that are for all youth in care. Youth need to be able to be housed safely where they want and to have their voices be centered in designing and implementing CPS housing and placement policies. Asking the youth who are LGBTQ and in care how to improve child welfare systems, services, and housing could be a best approach for respecting and affirming youth who are LGBTQ and in working to house them safely and permanently.

Likewise, finding supportive homes that can allow youth who are LGBTQ to flourish is needed, along with trying to achieve placement permanency within these homes. Youth-driven, individualized approaches that focus on permanency for youth who are LGBTQ could be an effective approach in trying to find stability for the youth. Finding ways to connect youth who are LGBTQ and are in care with each other, especially youth of color who are LGBTQ, may also help them to not feel alone and to build communities, friendships, and relationships. Equity for youth of color who are LGBTQ and are in care also means prioritizing efforts to ensure they are not disproportionately in congregate care settings, RTCs, and mental health institutions. Indeed, the role of congregate care settings, RTCs, and mental health institutions as part of child welfare systems may need to be assessed to better understand if they help youth to achieve placement permanency.

Limitations

Several limitations must be noted when interpreting this study's findings. This study is mainly retrospective data from youth already experiencing homelessness reflecting on their experiences within child welfare systems. Retrospective data is the youth reflecting back on their experiences in CPS in order to make sense of their current lives,

whereby they may have viewed their lives and needs differently while they were in child welfare systems. Future studies need to continue studying youth who are LGBTQ and are currently within child welfare systems, especially gaining their voices and perspectives on the services they are receiving. Longitudinal studies that can follow youth who are LGBTQ through CPS and what happens after they age out or leave care could be essential in understanding more concretely the potential links between child welfare systems and LGBTQ youth homelessness.

This was a qualitative study that took place in central Texas. As such, the results may not be generalizable to other urban or rural areas. Texas is a conservative state, which may influence experiences of youth who are LGBTQ in ways that may differ in other states and locales. The youth were also accessed through organizations. Youth who are in contact with organizations may have different past experiences than youth who may be experiencing homelessness but not accessing services and/or shelter through organizations. The majority of the data was also accessed through gaining rapport with the youth before conducting interviews. Some youth knew the researcher for months before interviews were conducted. This rapport can shape not only access to interviewees but also how much and what youth may disclose. The interviews may not have been possible without building this rapport, but nonetheless, this rapport can also shape the type of data gathered. Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the literature regarding how youth who are LGBTQ and are experiencing homelessness perceive how child welfare systems and gender segregation within these systems contributed to their experiences into homelessness.

Conclusion

For some youth who are LGBTQ, are experiencing homelessness, and were involved in child welfare systems, gender segregation of placements negatively impacted their experiences while in care. Gender segregation of child welfare systems further stigmatized some youth

who are LGBTQ, marking them as different and shaping feelings of isolation. Youth, especially youth of color, also experienced different forms of institutionalization. These experiences did not seem to help the youth to achieve placement permanency. Instead, the youth reported that these experiences created instability and led to multiple placements, leaving them often with no where to go when they left or aged out of care.

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