Transgender youth homelessness: Understanding programmatic barriers through the lens of cisgenderism

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ABSTRACT

Service access and acquisition are often complex and sometimes dangerous for transgender and gender expansive young people, who frequently experience stigma and discrimination and face systemic barriers including sex segregated programs and institutional practices that deny their own understanding and articulation of their gender. A common theme in the literature is recognition of the need for affirming services specifically designed to meet the needs of transgender young people experiencing homelessness, as this population may not utilize or have access to much needed services due to systemic barriers and fear of rejection and harassment. The current study investigates the lived experiences of transgender and gender expansive young people with histories of homelessness. This phenomenological qualitative investigation explores aspects of transgender and gender expansive youth's experiences, both at home and on the street. A recurring theme emerged in the participants' narratives — the seemingly insurmountable barriers constructed by systems that were not designed with their unique needs in mind. When understood through the lens of cisgenderism, the findings illuminate the structural barriers that exist for transgender and gender expansive young people and the systemic challenges service providers must address.

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1. Introduction

An estimated 20 to 40% of the approximately 1.6 million homeless youth in the United States identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015; Durso & Gates, 2012; Kipke, Weiss, & Wong, 2007; Ray, 2006; Lankenau, Clatts, Welle, Goldsamt, & Gwadz, 2005; Quintana, Rosenthal, & Krehely, 2010; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). According to this estimate, the percentage of LGBT youth experiencing homelessness is at least three times greater than the percentage of the general LGBT youth population, which is thought to be between 5 and 7% of the overall youth population (Quintana et al., 2010; Ray, 2006). In a recent survey of street outreach programs, 7% of young people (n = 656) identified as transgender (Whitbeck, Lazoritz, Crawford, & Hautala, 2014).

Service access and acquisition are often complex and sometimes dangerous for transgender and gender expansive young people, who frequently experience stigma and discrimination and face systemic barriers including sex segregated programs and institutional practices that deny their own understanding and articulation of their gender. A common theme in the social work literature is recognition of the need for affirming services specifically designed to meet the needs of transgender young people experiencing homelessness (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler, & Johnson, 2004; Bolas, 2007; Nolan, 2006). Also noted is the need for affirming practices for transgender young people, who

make up a disproportionate amount of the homeless LGBT youth population (Whitbeck et al., 2014; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006; Bolas, 2007).

The current study investigates the lived experiences of a group of New York City-based transgender and gender expansive young people with histories of homelessness. The phrase transgender and gender expansive is used to encompass the range of genders and gender expressions noted by the participants. Gender expansive is preferred to the commonly used 'gender non-conforming,' which implies individual pathology rather than societal intolerance of diverse genders and gender expressions. Recent psychological literature suggests avoiding the binary categorization of people as 'transgender' and 'cisgender' due to the inherent implication that transgender people and cisgender people are distinctly different beings and the potential for this implication to obstruct a focus on systemic oppression (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). The adoption of the label transgender was of significant importance for many of the study participants. As such, the term transgender is utilized herein, as part of the phrase 'transgender and gender expansive,' to respect the self-designated genders of the study participants. When the term transgender is used alone, it is reflective of the categories utilized in the cited research.

2. Literature review

LGBT young people comprise between 20 and 40% of the approximately 1.6 million homeless youth in the United States (Durso &

Gates, 2012; Kipke et al., 2007; Lankenau et al., 2005; Quintana et al., 2010; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). They are more likely to be thrown out of their homes than are non-LGBT youth, frequently due to parental rejection related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression (Choi et al., 2015; Durso & Gates, 2012; Mallon, 1992; Whitbeck et al., 2004). Recent attention has been drawn to the overrepresentation of transgender young people within the population of youth experiencing homelessness, as well as the issue of homelessness among transgender people in general (Quintana et al., 2010; Yu, 2010; Bolas, 2007; Ray, 2006; Mottet & Ohle, 2006; Xavier, 2000). Transgender young people are often forced to live outside of mainstream society, due to prejudice and discrimination in employment, housing, health care, and education. They often end up living on the streets or without a permanent residence (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2009; Thaler, Bermudez, & Sommer, 2009; Quintana et al., 2010; Yu, 2010; Bolas, 2007; Ray, 2006; Xavier, 2000).

Western cultures often render invisible transgender and gender expansive young people through marginalizing social structures that assume a binary classification of gender (Shelley, 2009; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). While some young people of transgender experience may prefer a binary classification of their gender, the utilization of a binary classification becomes problematic when the classification is imposed and does not align with one's understanding of their gender, also referred to as their self-designated gender (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). LGBT youth serving organizations' policies and practices may not apply to or include transgender young people (Pyne, 2011; McGuire & Conover-Williams, 2010; Mallon, 2009). For example, transgender and gender expansive young people have difficulty accessing shelter services, which commonly impose binary gender rules, room assignments, and dress codes (Thaler et al., 2009). Navigating gendered spaces and programs can cause marked distress for transgender and gender expansive individuals (Herman, 2013), due to the frequent failure on the part of programs to respect how people would like to be classified within the gendered space. Problematic classification occurs when the policies or procedures of programs require young people to be segregated based on their assigned sex, rather than their self-designated gender. Therefore, many young people end up on the street rather than in shelters that are meant to keep them safe. The above factors point to a need for safe places for transgender and gender expansive young people; the spaces in which other youth might feel safe – social service agencies, health care clinics, schools, group homes – are often the places where transgender and gender expansive young people are subject to abuse and harassment (Stieglitz, 2010).

Though the literature suggests that transgender young people are disproportionately represented in the population of unstably housed young people (Whitbeck et al., 2014; Bolas, 2007; Ray, 2006), little is known about their specific experiences, challenges, and needs accessing housing related services and supports. Missing from the discourse is a critique of the social service system that is failing to meet the needs of this particular population. The web of cultural oppression composed of transphobia, homophobia, heterosexism, and cisgenderism and the internalization of each impact the culture at large and affects LGBT people in profound and subtle ways (Connolly, 2005). The aforementioned concepts are important to comprehend for those seeking to provide better programs and services to transgender and gender expansive young people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of becoming homeless. Without an understanding of the pathways into homelessness for transgender and gender expansive youth, or what they identify as their primary needs, prevention and intervention efforts are less likely to be effective for this population of young people.

3. Cisgenderism

Lennon and Mistler (2014) define cisgenderism as "the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community (p. 63)." Cisgenderism is an ideology that is prejudicial in nature; it others people labeled as transgender (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Outlined in depth by Ansara and colleagues, cisgenderism provides a framework for understanding the delegitimization of one's self-identified gender as a form of societal oppression (Riggs, Ansara, & Treharne, 2015; Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). Cisgenderism includes both individual and systemic acts, which may be purposeful or inadvertent (Riggs et al., 2015). As an orienting framework, cisgenderism broadens the analysis of the harassment and discrimination experiences of homeless transgender and gender expansive young people from a focus on the micro level of interpersonal interactions to include the macro level of institutional structures that produce and maintain their marginalization.

Misgendering and pathologizing are two forms of cisgenderism explored in recent research. Misgendering refers to the inaccurate use of gendered language, such as not using an individual's current name, using an incorrect gender pronoun, or describing people who identify as men as biological women. Pathologizing refers to the labeling and treatment of people's self-designated genders as disordered (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012; McLemore, 2014; Riggs et al., 2015; Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). Misgendering and pathologizing contribute to the erasure of transgender people. Cisgenderism shapes the social context of the United States, from the individual practices of human interaction to the establishment of organizations and the procedures of institutions (Bauer et al., 2009). For example, within the United States' youth homelessness system, the majority of programs segregate young people based on their sex. Sex is often linked to genitalia, or the sex designation on an individual's birth certificate. These types of exclusionary policies lead to exclusionary programs and practices that deny young people's understanding of their genders. Cisgenderist ideology creates and maintains a system of power and privilege that subjugates transgender identities, expressions, and experiences (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012; Lennon & Mistler, 2014).

The cisgenderism framework can aid in understanding the experiences of transgender and gender expansive youth experiencing homelessness, focusing on the ways in which their self-understanding is overlooked, denied, and challenged by individuals and systems. Such conceptualizations are lacking in social work scholarship examining the needs, experiences, and challenges of transgender and gender expansive youth experiencing homelessness and the social service response to addressing youth homelessness. It is imperative that social workers grasp this concept if they are to make lasting change for transgender youth experiencing homelessness.

4. Methods

4.1. Sampling and procedures

Participants were recruited from New York City based youth serving organizations, utilizing a purposive sampling technique. Flyers were distributed to LGBT youth serving organizations and homeless youth serving organizations. Potential participants completed a questionnaire to determine eligibility. Young people were eligible if they were between the ages of 18 and 25, self-identified as transgender or described their gender as something different than what was societally expected of them based on their assigned sex, had experienced housing instability for a minimum of 60 days within the past 18 months, and were not living on the street at the time of the interview.

In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 young people (see Table 1 for demographic information). The semi-structured interview guide asked participants to describe their experiences related to both their self-designated genders and also their experiences of homelessness. Interviews lasted approximately 60–90 min. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The Institutional Review Board