Experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ Adults in Toronto's Homelessness and Housing Support System

UNITY HEALTH TORONTO

MAP Centre for Urban Health Solutions

Executive Summary

Between December 2023 and March 2024, 20 2SLGBTQ+ adults with lived expertise of homelessness were engaged to share their experiences navigating Toronto's housing and homelessness sector. Three staff members employed at service providers specific to this subpopulation were also interviewed as part of the study. The aim was to understand the challenges unique to 2SLGBTQ+ adults facing homelessness, and how they perceived services that were targeted to a 2SLGBTQ+ client base compared to those that were not. With this information, we created multi-level recommendations to help make services and programs safer and more welcoming for 2SLGBTQ+ adults experiencing homelessness.

About this Report

This report presents findings from a study which examined homelessness and housing instability among 2SLGBTQ+ adults in Toronto. It provides recommendations from the study developed based on the experiences of participants with lived experience of homelessness and the experiences of staff members employed at organizations that specialize in serving unhoused 2SLGBTQ+ adults. The views expressed in this report are the author's and may not reflect the opinions of MAP, St. Michael's Hospital, Unity Health Toronto, Fulbright, or any other organizations to which the author is affiliated.

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Land Acknowledgement

Unity Health Toronto acknowledges that the land on which we live, work, and operate on, Tkaranto, is part of the Dish with One Spoon Covenant territory and is the traditional and ancestral lands of many Nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinabek, the Haudenosaunee, the Chippewa, and the Wendat Nations. It is land that is part of Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit in 1787, also known as the 'Toronto Purchase', which was revisited in 1805 and 2010. It is still home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. By acknowledging the land, we acknowledge our treaty responsibilities in sharing this land and to the Indigenous people who have been the traditional caretakers of this land since time immemorial.

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Defining Terms

About the terms used in this report:

2SLGBTQ+ – An acronym used as short-hand for the "Two-Spirt, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer" community. The "2S" stands for Two-Spirit, which is an umbrella term specific to Indigenous and First Nations cultures describing individuals who identify with both male and female spirits

Allyship – When someone uses their privilege to support and work alongside another group

Cisgender (cis) – A term describing individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex that they were assigned at birth

Intersectionality – First coined in 1989 by scholar and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to the fact that social identities are not independent of each other. People can be oppressed and discriminated against in multiple, intersecting ways based on their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or other social identities.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) – Sexual orientation is one's emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction towards others. Gender identity is one's self-perception of their self as male, female, both, neither, or any placement along the male-female spectrum. Sexual orientation and gender identity are independent from each other.

Toronto Context

In Toronto, it is estimated that over 10,000 people are experiencing homelessness [1]. Of those who are experiencing homelessness in Toronto, 10 - 12% self-identify as being a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community [2, 3]. This proportion is even higher among youth (ages 16 to 24) who are unhoused, as 23% of youth staying at city-administered sites identify as 2SLGBTQ+ [3]. These numbers are likely underestimates, as 2SLGBTQ+ individuals are frequently undercounted when enumerating the unhoused population. Unhoused respondents may not feel comfortable disclosing their identity due to stigma or discrimination, safety concerns or intake forms may not be inclusive. Even with these limitations, it is known that 2SLGBTQ+ individuals are overrepresented within the unhoused population; for example, 6% of Toronto's general adult population (18+) self-identifies as gay, lesbian, or bisexual [4].

It is important to have an accurate portrait of who is experiencing homelessness as this data informs service offerings and organizational policies. Inaccurate measures of who identifies as 2SLGBTQ+ within the unhoused population may indicate that there is not a need for service, leading to a lack of support offerings for this population. In recent years, however, organizations that recognize the distinct needs of unhoused 2SLGBTQ+ individuals have been established in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), particularly for unhoused 2SLGBTQ+ youth and young adults. These include:

- **Friends of Ruby** – Emergency shelter and supportive transitional housing for 2SLGBTQ+ youth aged 16-29
- **YMCA Toronto's Sprott House** – Residential living for 2SLGBTQ+ youth and young adults aged 16-24
- **Blue Door Supportive Services, INNclusion** – Supportive communal housing for 2SLGBTQ+ youth aged 16-26 who are at risk for homelessness

Housing and shelter services for unhoused 2SLGBTQ+ adults exist in Toronto as well:

- **LOFT BLOOM** – Supportive housing for 18+ transgender and gender diverse individuals who want to do hormonal and/or surgical gender transition
- **LOFT Layered Supports** – Supportive housing for individuals with higher-support mental health needs who identify as 2SLGBTQ+
- **Pacewood** – Emergency shelter for 2SLGBTQ+ newcomers to Canada who arrived as refugees
- **Fife House*** - Supportive housing and support services for individuals living with HIV/AIDS

*Not specific to 2SLGBTQ+ people, but is a resource whose services acknowledge and are sensitive to the intersection between the queer community, homelessness and/or housing precarity, and having HIV/AIDS.

Despite the existence of these programs and services, though, there is still a dearth of resources for 2SLGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness, especially adults. Of the 49 emergency shelter locations listed on the City of Toronto's website, only two are specific to 2SLGBTQ+ individuals (Friends of Ruby, Pacewood) [5].

The Current Study

This report discusses preliminary findings from a qualitative study conducted in Toronto with 2SLGBTQ+ adults who have experienced homelessness, as well as frontline staff and managers who work with this subpopulation. Findings from this study will be useful for housing and homelessness service providers working with 2SLGBTQ+ adults or sector workers who wish to make their programs safer for their queer and/or transgender clients.

Ethics approval was received from Unity Health Toronto prior to engaging in research activity.

Below we provide an overview of who we spoke with, and how data was collected and analyzed.

Who did we speak with?

2SLGBTQ+ adults with experiences of homelessness (identified as "clients" throughout the remainder of the report) were recruited by the study team itself or with assistance from community partners. After receiving approval to conduct research activity at sites, a site visit was arranged and members of the study team visited locations in-person to inform the residents about the project. If a site visit was not possible, community partners passed along copies of the study flyer, which included contact information and instructions, to their clients. Participants also learned of the study through word-of-mouth, or snowball sampling where a participant would share information about the study to someone they knew who might also be interested in participating.

Clients were eligible if:

- They were at least 24 years old
- Self-identified as 2SLGBTQ+
- Lived in the GTA, and
- Had experienced homelessness within the past four years

Twenty clients who met these criteria were recruited from four housing programs and services that cater to or frequently serve queer and transgender clients. Most participants self-identified as transgender (30%); cisgender man (25%); or non-binary, gender diverse, or a similar identity (25%). Participants often picked multiple options to fully describe their sexuality, with queer (35%), gay (25%), and pansexual (20%) being the three most frequently selected sexualities. Roughly a third (35%) identified as Black and 30% identified as white, with 35% identifying as Arab, Middle Eastern, or West Asian; South Asian or Indo-Caribbean; East or Southeast Asian; or Latin American. At the time of participation, a majority (60%) responded that they were living in supportive housing or transitional/short-term housing with a quarter living in an emergency shelter.

Staff participants needed to have worked in the sector for at least one year and had to be currently employed in the housing or homelessness support sector in city of Toronto. Three staff who met these criteria participated in the study. All staff were employed at programs catering to 2SLGBTQ+ adults.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were given honoraria to compensate for their time.

How was data collected?

Participation began by filling out a sociodemographic survey, which is a questionnaire that asks basic participant information such as age, racial/ethnic characteristics, current living situation, gender identity, and sexual orientation. After completion of the survey, a semi-structured interview with the participant was conducted by the lead author of this report. Semi-structured interviews contain both pre-written and unplanned questions, as the interviewer may ask other questions pertaining to the research topic depending on the direction of the conversation.

Client interviews lasted from 27 to 105 minutes with staff interviews ranging from 53 to 77 minutes. Clients were asked about their entry into homelessness, experiences with housing and/or homeless support programs, and the impact of their identity/identities on their experiences with homelessness. Staff interviews discussed their professional background, their perception of their program/service, and how their program/service addresses intersectionality within their client base.

How was data analyzed?

All interviews were transcribed verbatim (i.e., word for word) with names, locations, and other sensitive, identifying details changed to more generic wording. The analysis started with three study team members independently reading through a selection of the transcripts, writing down short phrases or single words that they felt summarised what they were noticing in the participants' responses. The study team members then met to discuss their ideas and developed a list of common topics that emerged from the data. This list was in turn developed into a codebook, which included several overarching themes, subthemes, and individual codes that fell within those themes. After this was completed, the study team members again read through a selection of the transcripts, this time using the codebook to guide their interpretation of the responses. Afterwards, the study team members again met to reconcile discrepancies in code assignments or add or refine codes. In this last stage, a single coder worked on the remaining transcripts, meeting with other team members as necessary.

Results

We present the results in five main sections. To begin, we share client stories related to their entries into homelessness. We then share insights on what it's like to be a 2SLGBTQ+ adult in Toronto's shelter and housing system. The next section describes challenges that were unique to clients who were recent newcomers to Canada. The final section briefly shares observations from staff members related to the experiences of their clients as well as their own experiences as professionals in the housing and homelessness sector.

Entries into homelessness

The reasons behind participants' initial and/or subsequent entries into homelessness were complex and tied to personal circumstances. Participants shared their own "entry points" into homelessness and/or housing instability, and some commonalities and trends emerged from the data.

Unsafe Home Environments

While some described amicable splits from partners or platonic relationships (e.g., roommates, friends) leading to homelessness, having unsafe or volatile home environments was a frequent reason or contributing factor to participants becoming unhoused. Domestic conflict took on different forms, including intimate partner violence (IPV) or domestic violence (DV), family conflict that was not explicitly related to gender/sexuality, and family conflict directly related to gender/sexuality. Some participants were forced to leave their homes by parents or other family members as youth or young adults. Others exited these situations to escape discomfort and abuse. One participant, who endured abuse from a parent, described the circumstances leading to her first homelessness entry:

"And Mom would always be – we'd always fight. And by the time I was 17 it got to a point where we were fighting every day. And every time we would have to talk to each other. We couldn't – I couldn't live with her anymore." [A01]

Financial Difficulties

Participants described financial challenges as reasons for their homelessness, including experiencing job loss, which led to them no longer being able to afford housing.

Others shared facing rent increases that were beyond what they could afford:

> **"So, what I did was, I ended upfinding a room. In a house. And it was a family, which was nice, you know? So, stayed with them a little bit, you know? And you know, then I was working also part time a little bit. And then eventually, they said, oh, they have to do some renovations because of all that and they wanted to obviously make – they wanted to get more than 5, $600 for the room. Which was, yeah, so then I had to leave there." [A12]**

Many participants were on social assistance such as Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). They discussed that the amounts received were too low to afford both housing and other necessities, perpetuating housing instability:

> **"I was renting in places, but I couldn't afford them because the rent – so ODSP gives me a portion of money, like a specific amount of money. And part of it is for rent and part of it is for living. But the rent portion exceeded the rent portion of the check. So, it went into the living portion. So that means I couldn't live anymore. Like, I sometimes I had to live off of $100 a whole month so I had to eat." [A07]**

Service use experiences at sites not targeting 2SLGBTQ+ adults

Participants talked about their experiences in emergency shelters and other housing and homelessness services that did not offer specific services for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. Although previous research has shown that unhoused 2SLGBTQ+ individuals often have adverse experiences at sites that do not offer specific services for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, participants' responses ranged from having negative to positive experiences and in-between. It is important to note that, although the following sections are organized categorically, different types of experiences could, and sometimes did, exist simultaneously (i.e., having neutral or positive relationships with staff members while also experiencing discrimination from other residents).

Challenging Experiences

Participants shared negative experiences they had at sites that did not offer specific services for 2SLGBTQ+ adults. These included being subject to discrimination from other residents and staff as well as not feeling safe at these locations:

Discrimination from other residents

Several participants shared that they had been discriminated against by other residents at housing and homelessness sites that did not offer specific services for 2SLGBTQ+ adults. Descriptions of the discrimination participants faced primarily centred around homophobia and transphobia. Participants described being threatened and having other residents call them derogatory words. One transgender participant using he/him pronouns recalled being asked to explain his presence in the male shelter section and being verbally accosted for being there.

Discrimination also included experiencing racism and poor treatment based on other personal characteristics like being neurodivergent. One transgender woman of East Asian descent discussed how different forms of discrimination overlapped when she resided at a youth shelter:

> **"It was just a bunch of white kids who think they're better but then they themselves are homeless so they're angry. So then they see me and I'm Chinese and I'm autistic so they pick on me." [A01]**

Discrimination from staff

A few participants discussed their discomfort hearing shelter staff members casually use homophobic and/or transphobic language. One transgender participant shared that, at an emergency shelter they resided in, staff members would "make jokes" alongside the residents. Other transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse participants shared several instances of being repeatedly misgendered. The lack of internal oversight to correct staff behavior made participants feel they could not rely on the authority figures for support.

Lack of safety

Several participants discussed feeling unsafe in sites that did not offer specific services for 2SLGBTQ+ adults, which influenced their behavior. In response to or in anticipation of discrimination from staff, some participants remained closeted or altered their physical appearance to avoid disclosure. One transgender participant described his experience managing his identity in a shelter:

> **"Yeah, I would just, um, pretend that I was cis pretty much. You know? Be like, 'What are you talking about?' You know, I've got my hair, like…my hair at the time was short, you know, so it was a bit easier. Now it's long and I'm growing it out again." [A07]**

Other participants mentioned that they intentionally avoided going to sites that were not catered to 2SLGBTQ+ individuals because they were afraid of the conditions they would face there. A nonbinary participant said, after re-entering homelessness as an older adult,

> **"I couldn't, um, go to these cis shelters 'cause I'm scared for my life." [A12]**

Positive Experiences

Despite instances of discrimination and fearing mistreatment within programs that did not offer specific services for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, participants also shared positive experiences. Thanks to staff and residents who acted as allies and made positive connections with queer and transgender residents, some participants felt included, supported, and accepted in these spaces.

Allyship and Acceptance from Staff

Participants recalled instances where staff members stood up for them or showed they did not tolerate homophobic/transphobic rhetoric and actions. One person shared an anecdote of staff members ensuring that an anti-discrimination poster would remain in place:

> **"There was – the caretaker guy, the head of maintenance was very, very cool. After I mentioned that this no tolerance, homophobia thing (poster), whatever, was put backwards or hidden for the umpteenth time, he said, 'I talked to the boss lady and she told me to attach it to the wall with, like, screws.' He goes – she assumed that, like, to put a screw on the holder thing and put it on there to make it harder to take off. But he said - he goes, he put it in a prominent place in the cafeteria." [A04]**

This same participant recalled that the site's inclusive stance extended to the site's leadership:

> **"Luckily, the lady running it, in charge, was pretty strict. She had a no tolerance rule against tolerance, I guess you would call it. Like, any behavior that was racist, homophobic, or anything insulting or belittling about anybody was completely unallowed. She was very vocal about it." [A04]**

Allyship and Acceptance from Other Residents

In some cases, participants discussed that other residents were accepting of them and other 2SLGBTQ+ residents, which led to positive bonds:

> **"Like, oh yeah, you know – and sometimes there was the guys who were gay and the straight guys who were okay with other guys being gay. So, there was camaraderie in different – it was kind of, like, people that knew right way, within five minutes, like, that were there." [A08]**

At other times, these bonds grew into meaningful friendships with other residents. These relationships were sometimes protective factors against bullying and harassment from less-accepting residents. One participant who recently immigrated to Canada expressed his surprise being befriended by residents who did not identify as 2SLGBTQ+ and the kindness with which they treated him:

> **"So it was like you are publicly talking to me? Someone was basically attacking me for my sexuality here at the shelter and he stood up for me and I was like, 'Wow.'" [A17]**

Other 2SLGBTQ+ residents

Some participants shared that they were able to make connections with other 2SLGBTQ+ residents at sites that did not provide specific services for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. One transgender resident who came to Canada as a refugee shared that a shelter social worker helped her "meet other girls." She credits these friendships with other transgender women as instrumental in helping her adjust to her new life in Canada. [A03]

Other participants described advocating for other 2SLGBTQ+ residents, especially after an act of discrimination had taken place. One transgender woman provided emotional support to another transgender woman at the shelter after she encountered violence:

> **"That person is from my country and...I've been giving her – she's a trans – I've been giving her support, taking her out. And she was so much, like, disturbed. Yeah." [A05]**

Another participant shared that although he inadvertently became the de facto point person for other 2SLGBTQ+ residents, he later came to identify with that role, saying:

> **"And I think that's when I declared myself like I'm the LGBT safe space kinda thing. It was like, I never meant to do this."**

In this position, he felt a sense of moral obligation to help other 2SLGBTQ+ residents:

> **"If you see somebody going through some kind of intimidation or bullying like that and you feel strong enough to do something about it...it's your job to do something about it. It's like your moral responsibility to." [A04]**

Service use experiences at sites providing specific services for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals

Participants also discussed their experiences at housing and homelessness services that specifically catered to 2SLGBTQ+ clients, which included both youth- and adult-centered sites. Earlier work on this topic has shown that unstably housed queer and transgender clients tend to prefer specialized services because they feel safer and more accepted due to these types of sites having knowledgeable staff and clients who also identify as members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community [6, 7]. While clients largely echoed these sentiments, results from the current study were mixed. Participants' experiences of these services existed on a spectrum from positive to negative. In some cases, participants praised aspects of the services while also bringing up shortcomings in other parts of the service delivery.

Positive Experiences

Understanding and Helpful Staff

Staff were frequently praised for the way they treated residents. At sites that were tailored to the 2SLGBTQ+ community, participants described how staff behavior helped reinforce cultural norms of acceptance in those spaces. One participant, who had previously been in a shelter where staff regularly used homophobic and transphobic language, said that the way staff behaved at a tailored site for youth was a welcome change:

> **"And, um, [tailored site], they're like, 'Oh, welcome! What are your pronouns?' And I was like, 'Thank you!'" [A11]**

The same participant felt "really lucky" to have been able to access support services that cater to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Now in an adult service that is also specifically geared to queer and transgender clients, they appreciate being able to work with staff who also identify as transgender because "they just get it." They also felt comfortable with the cisgender staff, who were trained and equipped with the ability to compassionately engage with their clients.

Others shared that staff were especially supportive with helping them manage their mental health challenges. One participant described how, prior to coming to the site that offered specific 2SLGBTQ+ supports, he had a difficult time asking for help because he never wanted to be an imposition. He shared that the staff helped him overcome internalized pressures to always deal with his problems alone:

> **"They forcibly taught me to ask for help. And they're absolutely amazing. I would find it almost hard to move from there because I've gotten used to the help and also now I've gotten forced to find out how many times I do have to ask for help as far as, uh, mental health and emotional things. 'Cause I no longer have that tank mentality where I'm like, 'I'm fine, I'm fine!'" [A04]**

Welcoming and Safe Environments

Others mentioned that they felt especially welcomed at 2SLGBTQ+-centric services. For some participants, this had to do with the immediacy with which they were able to bond with staff, who built rapport through kindness and acceptance:

> **"Yeah. Immediately. I guess I felt the chemistry immediately. [The staff were] really nice. Like, good vibes." [A06]**

Clients also shared that they generally felt safe at these services, which they primarily described in terms of mental and emotional safety. Staff played a major role in upholding this sense of safety by making themselves available for regular check-ins or impromptu discussions:

> **"We chat about things from time to time. If there's something I want to share or talk about, I can share openly. [The staff are] open-minded…I feel safe and supported." [A06]**

A different participant added:

> **"And, they check in frequently with how everything's going, and because it is a trans-specific site, there's trans staff." [A11]**

The same person stated that the availability of queer and trans-specific services played a significant role in reducing their suicidality:

> **"I think because I've been really lucky to have queer support services, that's made the big difference between me being alive and me not being alive. Like, I don't think I would still be alive if I didn't have [housing specific to 2SLGBTQ+ individuals] and if I didn't have the supports that I have." [A11]**

Other participants felt welcomed and safe at these services because they were surrounded by others within the 2SLGBTQ+ community. One currently housed participant, who was regularly attending a community drop-in group for transgender and gender diverse adults, said:

> **"[The drop-in group is] what makes me happy and seen [and] being with my community because it's safe in a safe space." [A12]**

This was echoed by a participant who lived in housing for 2SLGBTQ+ youth:

> **"We had a little community in the house. Most of us got along, so it was really good…so, I think that made a big difference." [A11]**

Challenging Experiences

Despite the benefits of having housing and homelessness sites that cater to 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with what they felt were shortcomings of these services and programs. These perceived shortcomings included experiencing discrimination, difficulty establishing connections, and frustrations with service delivery.

Discrimination

Although not a common experience among participants, some individuals shared instances where they had been discriminated against at sites specific to 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. One participant who recently immigrated to Canada felt that she received unequal treatment from staff because of the region of the world where she was from. Another newcomer to Canada recounted being yelled at because of her limited English proficiency. One participant expressed her disappointment that some staff were still misgendering clients at a location specific to 2SLGBTQ+ clients. Two people shared that there were residents at one specific site who were not members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and these individuals exhibited homophobic and transphobic behavior, which made them and other 2SLGBTQ+ residents feel unsafe.

Challenges making connections with other residents

A theme observed across all sites was that clients had trouble establishing social connections at sites. A few participants felt this inability to find community was at least in part discriminatory. For instance, one participant shared that she felt "excluded" because she didn't speak English. [A02]

Others believed that overall site culture contributed to their difficulty forming connections. One participant who had transferred to a site that was specific to the 2SLGBTQ+ community from one that was not reflected that he felt **"pretty lonely [at current residence] still."**

He elaborated further, saying:

> **"Yeah, there isn't really, yeah, there isn't really ways to make connections with other people living here." [A09]**

Another participant living in the same residence had a similar observation, noting

> **"We don't really interact. It's very much, like, a little bit isolating." [A11]**

Frustration with service

Some participants shared their unhappiness with certain aspects of the service they were receiving from sites. One participant felt that they had been placed into unsafe housing and had their experiences invalidated by staff when they expressed concerns. Another was frustrated with his wait for housing as he felt he was being skipped in line for housing:

> **"People are going by me. Like, nonstop. Like, my friend got out of jail. He was housed upstairs on the third floor and an apartment! I'm sitting there...and watching everybody go by me." [A20]**

This quote not only reflects the systemic challenge of housing shortages but also relates to the lack of communication that can happen between staff and people who use services.

Experiences Specific to Recent Immigrants

Recent immigrants identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ had many of the same challenges as did non-recent immigrants, however some distinct experiences were common to this population.

Not experiencing homelessness prior to entering Canada

Many recent immigrants were housed prior to coming to Canada. For these individuals, entries into homelessness were attributed to an inability to access affordable housing and not having social and financial support in Canada.

Housing Unaffordability

Several recent immigrants discussed that they were not aware of all the financial barriers that would complicate their ability to obtain housing once they arrived in Canada. This was the case for a participant who came to the country as a student. He said that although he had money, he was not prepared for just how costly housing was:

> **"Yeah, just too expensive...I came here, I have little much money, but I can't get. It was really high. The prices are really high." [A10]**

This sentiment was echoed by another participant:

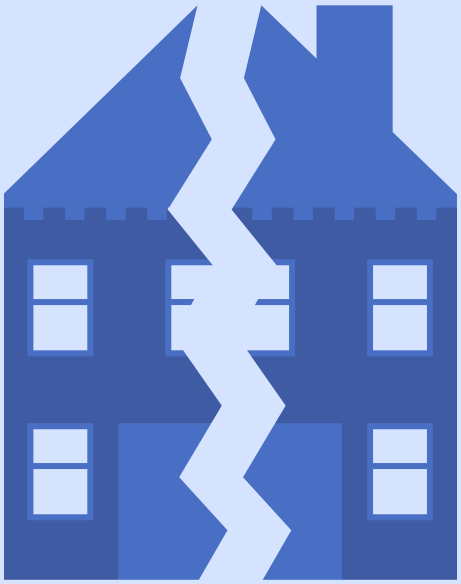
> **"I can't live any other place because Canada is expensive. I don't come from a very good background. Like, my parents are not millionaires. They took loan...it took them two years to send me here." [A16]**

A staff participant corroborated the challenges newcomers have with affording housing once in Canada, sharing how many newcomers face economic uncertainty as they wait to receive work permits, which grant permission to obtain paid employment. In the interim, some may engage in unpaid work such as volunteering or apply to social support programs, but the lack of substantial income bars many from accessing private market housing.

Lack of Social Support

Other recent immigrants discussed escaping homophobia and transphobia in their country of origin. Upon arrival, however, many lacked existing support networks and ended up in the shelter system or experiencing other forms of homelessness. One participant described her dilemma:

> **"I had to leave [my home country] because over there they don't accept gay and transgender people and I was assaulted by other people because of my identity. So that's why I decided to move here where I can live in safety...because my family is in [my home country]. I have no one here." [A02]**



Intersectional challenges

Although non recent immigrants also experienced intersectional forms of discrimination (i.e., experiencing racism in addition to homophobia), recent immigrants in the study shared that being a newcomer added other layers of discrimination. Participants discussed how discrimination based on their citizenship status was rarely the only type of prejudice they encountered, but one that exacerbated the barriers they already faced with navigating systems, accessing housing, and feeling safe in Canada as members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. One participant described how her newcomer status was just one part of her identity that led to discrimination in the rental market:

> **"In the past years, it happened that because I was [a recent immigrant] and gay and transgender, a landlord didn't want to rent me an apartment because of who I am." [A02]**

Another participant came to Canada as a student to escape transphobia in her home country. She lamented the fact that, because she was unable to find housing, she ended up living with other students who were also from her country. In this living situation, she describes how the same dynamics that prompted her leaving her home country have been replicated in her place of residence:

> **"We all come from South Asian families. They – for them, it's the same. So, my life has not changed from [my home country] to Toronto. Because same people....They behave in the same manner how [my home country] was."**

In seeking alternate housing options, this participant found a lack of resources for individuals in her situation, which led to her spending as much time as possible at public libraries and parks to avoid the verbal and physical abuse she faced at her residence. [Excerpt from A16]

Staff similarly discussed the need for cultural competence and the importance of listening to clients rather than making choices for them:

> **"I mean, with anyone, we try to take their lead. And folks with other marginalized identities will know what they want, will know what kind of services they feel that they could...benefit from." [B03]**

They noted that clients may want to connect with communities outside of the cultural group they came from due to a desire to access spaces with different cultural norms and that it is necessary to take an intersectional approach that considers clients' explicit wants.

Staff Member Perspectives

Staff participants were asked about their clients' experiences as well as their own experiences as staff related to their 2SLGBTQ+ identity, or another cultural group they belonged to.

In discussing client experiences, staff largely confirmed the findings already described in this report. An additional finding included the need for affordable 2SLGBTQ+ friendly mental health care. Staff members vehemently felt that therapy was critical to help clients

> **"unpack some of [their] traumas and... heal from some of [their] traumas," [B04]**

but felt that effective care that was sensitive to 2SLGBTQ+ needs was challenging to find. Staff also emphasized the importance working with clients to develop and implement flexible program-level policies such as less-restrictive curfew hours concomitant with clients' employment circumstances.

Staff participants also shared their own experiences, which centered around the unique circumstances of working closely with 2SLGBTQ+ clients when they themselves also identify as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, addressing both the benefits and difficulties. One participant felt their own identity as a transgender person was more respected by working in an environment specific to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Another felt that, due to his personal connection to the community, he had acquired a level of expertise that allowed him to intuit clients' needs during intake and direct them to services in a timely fashion.

They also discussed difficulties they encountered. A prominently expressed sentiment was feeling disproportionately responsible for clients' needs and safety due to other staff members lacking requisite knowledge of 2SLGBTQ+ topics. A participant shared that they spent time instructing colleagues on "queer 101" topics. Although this was burdensome and frustrating, they felt it was necessary to do because they wanted to improve the program's ability to

> **"overall...support [clients] competently." [B03]**

This frustration was exacerbated by the loss of transgender staff members, who often were replaced by non-2SLGBTQ+ staff, a trend that clients questioned.

Related to the challenges faced by both clients and staff, one participant discussed organization-wide efforts to improve trainings and policies to mitigate cultural insensitivity.

Limitations of the Study

The empirical findings from this report should be taken with consideration of some research limitations. Due to the small sample size (20 client participants, 3 staff participants) and the fact that the study was conducted in a single, large Canadian city, findings may not be broadly applicable. Additionally, the perspective of cis women is missing from this study. Further research should be done in different-sized jurisdictions and with participants whose perspectives may be underrepresented within homelessness research.

Recommendations

This summary report provides an overview of what we heard from 2SLGBTQ+ adults accessing services in Toronto's emergency shelter and housing system. Based upon these results, we have crafted a series of recommendations focused on five main areas: 1) Program policy; 2) Network-and community-building; 3) Staff supports and training; 4) Resource sharing; and 5) Systems Thinking.

Program Policy

1. Establish more housing services specific to the 2SLGBTQ+ community and increase support for existing 2SLGBTQ+ services. Based on the homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia participants faced in emergency shelters and housing services for the general unhoused population, there is a clear need for housing created specifically to meet the needs of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Additional support is needed for already-established services that are specific to 2SLGBTQ+ populations. The following considerations should be made when designing 2SLGBTQ+ housing:

a. Services specific to 2S, transgender, and other gender-diverse clients. The 2SLGBTQ+ community is not a monolith, and transgender and gender-diverse individuals have distinct support needs that may best be attended to in settings with the resources and staffing to properly address those need. Gender-diverse participants also discussed being discriminated against by cisgender clients and staff, even in settings specific to 2SLGBTQ+ people. Thus, 2S, transgender, and gender diverse clients may feel safer in spaces where all or the vast majority of clients and/or staff are also gender diverse.

b. Supports for 2SLGBTQ+ recent immigrants that use a trauma-informed approach. 2SLGBTQ+ recent immigrants often described escaping SOGI-related discrimination as a primary or contributing reason for coming to Canada. Upon arrival, these adults may have residual trauma or difficulties finding self-acceptance. Supports should address mental health coping strategies and identity development from a trauma-informed lens.

c. Hiring and retaining staff who identify as 2SLGBTQ+. It is crucial for housing services to hire 2SLGBTQ+-identifying staff members since clients felt safe and most comfortable with other 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. Service providers should also plan ahead and consider how they aim to retain 2SLGBTQ+ staff. Although turnover was a challenge for all service agencies, participants described queer and transgender staff members being replaced by cisgender employees, which made it harder for them to find someone who they felt could understand their experiences.

2. If no specific policies already exist, formalize policies for addressing discrimination against minoritized clients. Housing services and programs without existing policies should work to develop policies addressing discrimination against 2SLGBTQ+, racialized, disabled, and other historically marginalized populations. In doing so, they should consult existing anti-discriminatory policies for general guidelines and best practices (e.g. City of Toronto's Shelter Standards). Minoritized clients who have experienced homelessness should be engaged throughout the process of developing policies to address discrimination. Additionally, posting these policies in public spaces and enforcing them will demonstrate organizational commitment to 2SLGBTQ+ clients' rights and safety.

For more information on the Toronto Shelter Standards, click here: **https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/9828-Toronto-Shelter-Standards230328AODA.pdf**

3. If anti-discrimination policies are already in place, ensure they are comprehensive enough to address client intersectionality. Existing anti-discriminatory policies should be regularly audited for comprehensiveness, clarity, and applicability. Participants with multiple marginalized identities discussed seeing repercussions for one form of discrimination while repeated denigration of another part of their identity appeared to remain unaddressed. Clear communication channels should exist for clients to share the ways they feel they are being discriminated against, and staff should feel empowered to take action against discrimination.

Network and Community-Building

1. Create structured opportunities for clients to socialize with one another. Loneliness and feeling disconnected were commonly expressed feelings among clients. Many clients said they appreciated, or would appreciate, regularly scheduled opportunities to socialize with other clients with some specifically identifying past experiences where they were in charge of planning events. Empowering clients to take agency by organizing and coordinating events with others may help mitigate feelings of isolation and build community within housing services.

2. Follow clients' leads on what, if any, community groups they would benefit from connecting with. Some clients shared the emotional benefits they received by joining community groups at spaces like The 519. Due to the barriers unhoused clients may face finding such groups on their own, services should have lists readily available for them to consult. However, when working with clients who express an interest in finding community outside of the housing service, it is important to take an individualized approach. This involves supporting clients by following their lead and not assuming which group(s), if any, they would benefit from joining.

3. Create an environment that is conducive for open dialogue. Clients appreciated opportunities to advocate for themselves or on behalf of others. When their observations for potential improvements were listened to and acted upon, they felt empowered and more invested in keeping their residence a safe place to live at. Open dialogue between clients and all levels of staff can be fostered by having scheduled weekly meetings or supporting the formation of a tenant advocacy committee.

Staff

1. Provide additional emotional and material support for 2SLGBTQ+ staff. 2SLGBTQ+ staff shared they often felt responsible for training non-2SLGBTQ+ staff on what they felt were basic SOGI concepts. Additionally, because 2SLGBTQ+ clients often feel safer speaking to other queer and transgender people, 2SLGBTQ+ staff expressed feeling disproportionately responsible for their 2SLGBTQ+ clients' well-being. To mitigate burn-out and reduce turnover among 2SLGBTQ+ staff, organizations should provide substantive support. Ideally support should recognize the added challenges of working with a population with a shared identity.

2. Bolster staff training on working with 2SLGBTQ+ and other minoritized populations. It is clear more training is needed so staff know how to work effectively with 2SLGBTQ+ and other minoritized clients. In creating and deploying trainings, the following should be considered:

a. Trainings should empower all staff to identify and act on opportunities to reinforce organizational commitment to anti-discrimination. Clients shared moments where support staff members acted as allies in surprising or unexpected ways either through their words or actions. These moments reinforced institutional norms of acceptance, which made clients feel safe. Training cannot encompass every situation staff may encounter on the job, but it can teach staff what good allyship looks like. Organizational policies can then be written in ways that encourage staff at all levels to autonomously act on opportunities to be good allies in whichever role they are in.

b. Trainings should equip staff with the ability to recognize and respond to signs of trauma and mental health challenges. Staff should be trained on the ways that trauma can manifest within the populations they work with and be equipped with the skills to respond to it. Organizations should also have processes in place for referring clients to mental health services that meet their specific needs. Staff should also understand how to recognize when they are finding it difficult to emotionally balance their work and personal lives. As with clients, channels should exist for staff to find supports to maintain a sense of well-being.

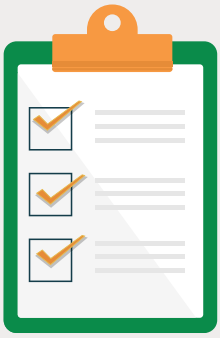
c. Trainings should discuss the needs of 2S, transgender, and other gender diverse individuals, including the importance of gender-affirming care. 2SLGBTQ+ staff described becoming de facto experts on provincial laws surrounding gender-affirming care. Through this acquired knowledge, they developed intake processes to help gender diverse clients consider what, if any, forms of gender-affirming care they felt they might benefit from and what steps they would need to take to access such care. Training should be developed by knowledgeable 2SLGBTQ+ agencies on how to help clients who wish to find gender-affirming care navigate the medical and legal processes.

Resource Sharing

1. Generate a list of approved and vetted landlords who are willing to rent to clients who are 2SLGBTQ+, racialized, newcomers, and/or have historically experienced discrimination in the private market. Homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination were shared as housing accessibility barriers. Identifying 2SLGBTQ+-friendly landlords and rental agencies will give clients more options as they look for housing.

2. Initiate and sustain collaborations with other social services and share strategies for helping 2SLGBTQ+ clients. Staff shared the challenges they encountered identifying or connecting with 2SLGBTQ+-friendly services to send their clients to. However, the relationships they had managed to create were instrumental when clients had needs beyond what the service could provide. Linkages between service agencies should be created and maintained so clients can receive support from accepting and welcoming organizations in a timely manner.

3. Streamline pathways into 2SLGBTQ+ services. When asked how they discovered certain programs specific to 2SLGBTQ+ people, many clients described finding them by chance, such as through a knowledgeable caseworker or other connection. The process by which unhoused 2SLGBTQ+ folks find out about existing tailored programming should be simplified so clients are fully aware of the service landscape. In combination with the previous recommendation, services can facilitate more streamlined referral processes to 2SLGBTQ+ specific programs.



Systems Thinking

1. Increase safe and affordable housing options. There should be different housing options available for clients (e.g., communal living, emergency shelters, supportive housing). All forms of housing should seek to rapidly house clients in a location of their choosing. The Housing First model is particularly appropriate for 2SLGBTQ+ and other minoritized clients because it's centered on an individual's autonomy, choice, and control in the process of identifying where they want to live.

2. Increase social benefit payments. Clients expressed not being able to cover their basic living expenses, even with social benefit payments like OW and ODSP. Raising social benefit payments would mitigate people sliding into unsafe housing situations or having to choose between buying food and paying rent. This is particularly important for 2SLGBTQ+ adults, as they may experience barriers to employment due to homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia.

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