

Finding Pride: Moving Beyond the Rainbow in Youth Homelessness Services

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More than half of young people who identify as Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual report compromised or below average living conditions. For Gender Diverse young people this increases to 71 per cent. LGBTQI+ young people are twice as likely to experience homelessness compared with their heterosexual cis gendered peers, and 33 per cent of queer youth choose not to engage with crisis support centres due to anticipated discrimination.¹

It is clear that LGBTQI+ pride representation, service inclusiveness and safety are critically necessary priorities for youth homelessness services. However, while many services attempt to do this through the use of visible or overt symbols of inclusiveness such as rainbow lanyards, slogan stickers, pride focused celebration events and inclusive language in social media and print resources, it is worth considering that in order for these strategies to be experienced as inclusive, LGBTQI+ individuals must first have fostered a sense of pride in their identity.

Transgender youth specifically have been evidenced to experience both overt and covert discrimination accessing services which not only leads to feelings of shame, but the anticipation of such discrimination and stigma can lead to higher rates of self-harm and suicide.² Research indicates that self-identification

is beneficial to young people's wellbeing.³ All organisations working with young people, particularly those in the highly vulnerable space of homelessness, can have an active role in helping to foster this sense of pride which can help LGBTQI+ young people build resilience in order to feel more comfortable in their identities. By going beyond the more superficial level of ticking the box of inclusivity through pride focussed strategies, services can work in the more complex but necessary space of building safe pathways to enable vulnerable young people to feel able to reach out to services at the times when they most need support.⁴

Recognising that pride in identity is a highly individual journey rather than a static state of being, Brisbane Youth Service undertook a series of interviews with LGBTQI+ young people accessing homelessness services. These interviews highlighted the importance of the processes leading up to finding pride, as well as the necessary and beneficial role that services can play in fostering genuine inclusive practice to support highly marginalised queer young people along the pathway to pride.

With funding from Brisbane City Council, 12 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people who were accessing groups and individual support and who identified as LGBTQI+. Each

30- to 90-minute interview was recorded and transcribed before thematic analysis. Results showed that there were common themes around a four staged process leading towards young people developing a sufficient level of self-identity pride for the overtly pride-oriented strategies commonly used by youth services to be effective in fostering a sense of safety and inclusion.

The first step identified was the experience of a sense of safety for the young people involved, to assist in them internally identifying.

'I'm scared that if I asked for my pronouns to be respected, they're gonna not take me seriously.'

The research suggests that in the early stages of identifying as LGBTQI+, young people don't feel safe in their identity and may be navigating through internal and external experiences of shame, stigma, and denial. In this stage young people are often engaging in unhelpful and destructive behaviours in order to cope with the shame, potentially reinforcing denial. It is important through this stage that practitioners and service providers are able to hold space for youth experiencing uncertainty in their identity, including self-rejection, and provide a safe space for them to navigate this journey of self-acceptance at their own pace and in their own ways.



Following this stage, the findings suggest queer youth then need to find safe ways in which they can connect with a community of peers.

'Because it's not just about feeling safe in your home, it's about feeling safe in the community as well'

Research indicates that community support for LGBTQI+ youth helps to contribute toward positive adjustment and self-esteem.⁵ During this stage LGBTQI+ young people benefit from connecting with others who are having, or have had, similar experiences to them. When this is able to be facilitated in ways that don't rely on having developed a sense of pride in self-identity, it can help young people to feel safe to move towards finding representation and a sense of belonging within the LGBTQI+ community, even if they are not yet ready to self-identify. This allows young people to experiment with their presentation (pronouns, name, appearance) in a safe environment. Creating these spaces within a homelessness service delivery context offers opportunity for representation for those who are further marginalised by intersections of identity such as those who are not white and able bodied, or those experiencing intersectional layers of trauma and discrimination for other reasons. Inclusion in community-based groups and activities that are not necessarily pride identified but which are safe spaces for those of diverse sexuality and gender identity can help to reduce alienation and increase a sense of safety in moving toward finding pride in their own identity. Services can help this process by facilitating queer-friendly community spaces and activities that are integrated within mainstream homelessness service delivery.

Research also indicates that this open inclusive social support can help LGBTQI+ young people build resilience to deal with all forms of discriminatory behaviour,⁶ which cuts across many different aspects of service delivery in a homelessness context.

Resilience was the next stage discussed as necessary for young people to start feeling comfortable identifying with pride symbology and inclusive practices in the broader world.

'I am dreading the day I have to go into Centrelink and I'm dreading the day I have to go to the doctor either, you know what I mean?'

The process of finding resilience focuses around building the inner strength necessary to navigate mainstream culture and community spaces while occupying their emerging queer identity. It is the next stage from finding safety in identifying and connecting within a queer-safe space. These mainstream spaces include Centrelink, housing and accommodation services, hospitals and community health services, public venues, and educational environments. Often young people report fluctuating back and forth between this and the previous stage until they find steady ground in which they feel confident presenting and advocating for themselves openly. During this stage it is important for workers to walk alongside the evolving young person and support them to engage in mainstream services, using the learning from the previous two stages to build their resilience in the process. While young people may not be ready to openly engage in pride in identity, they learn to survive navigating the world with increasing authenticity.

The last stage is the one most often employed by services who are seeking to be inclusive, without allowance for the earlier stages of the journey. After having developed as sense of safety, engagement with community, and building resilience, young people may be ready to positively engage with pride-focussed organisational strategies. This is the stage of finding pride. During this stage sexuality and gender diverse young people are able to develop a sense of pride in their identity, practice self-acceptance, and feel more confident navigating the world around them. This is when young people have reached a point when they may be able to

positively respond to homelessness services that use rainbow lanyards, stickers, pronoun badges and other celebrations of queer identity.

'I've learned to try and accept myself. Like it's taken me a very long time for me to accept myself, but its only really through being out of home that I've been able to accept it'

It is at this stage young people start to feel safe identifying with the rainbows, and with 'out and proud' language and presentation. During this stage simply letting a young person know you are proud of them, can go a long way. Finding pride can also mean that young people feel comfortable not only advocating for their own rights but for those of others and feel comfortable participating in community activism. Nearly one third of trans-identified young people associated activism with feeling empowered, knowing their rights and building resilience. Being engaged in activism may be an important process for many LGBTQI+ identifying young people, and thus for the services that support them.⁷

It is important to note that finding pride is a highly individualistic journey, and diversity of experience is characteristic of all LGBTIQ+ homelessness experiences. While one young person might welcome staged pride-oriented support within a homelessness service context another may not, or may not find it culturally appropriate, or may want or prefer to compartmentalise or differentiate their support options. While LGBTIQ+ young people will often be engaging with homelessness services because of identity-related trauma and discrimination, some may prefer to access different services for different areas of their lives. Young people also may not always want to come out, or to identify to workers. The process can take time and young people have clearly told us that it is important to create and maintain an inclusive space where assumptions about heteronormative identity and support needs are minimised, yet overt pride in identity is not an expectation.



Image created by Shelley Morris @flagshipstudio /design@flagshipstudio.com

Fostering pride is a collective effort. Becoming comfortable within one's identity and developing safety to connect and navigate the world contributes toward the process of finding pride. With the mental health and wellbeing aspects of acceptance and positive self-identity a fundamental aspect of being able to sustain safe and stable housing in the longer term, homelessness services play a valuable and necessary role in the process of young people finding pride. With proactive, genuine support and understanding throughout the process young people can find a sense of pride. Youth workers can play an active role in enabling queer and questioning young people to feel at home within themselves, to feel more confident in reaching out for support from services, and, ultimately, to develop a sense of home in our communities. By seeing pride as

a journey, we can work together to move beyond the rainbow.

Endnotes

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