Sexual Minorities' Trajectory to Homelessness

When I was 16 years old, I ended up having to drop out of school because my grades dropped due to my life at home not being very stable. At the time, I had a mother who was struggling with being an alcoholic, and she had a partner who failed to try and understand me, being a sexual minority. So I would run away from home and was homeless for weeks at a time in pursuit of freedom to be myself and be more independent. After leaving home I either couch surfed with acquaintances, or I slept somewhere in downtown Seattle that was warm. I utilized the YouthCare Orion Center for access to a caseworker who helped me access medical coverage, transit vouchers, and participate in their GED program. After earning my GED, I aged out of the facility and was on my own to support myself. I got lucky afterwards that I reconnected with my mother during her breakup and when a grandparent got sick back home in Minnesota. After moving back home to Minnesota, I was able to save up some money and move into my own apartment and avoided falling back into homelessness, but I still lived in chronic poverty for a handful of years later. Sadly, my story is not unique. In fact, between 20-40% percent of homeless and runaway youth in the United States identify themselves as a sexual minority (Moore 2007).

The purpose of this article is to bring this issue into the light so that future generations of sexual minorities don't have to be homeless and worry about where they will sleep next and when they will get their next meal. I think it is important that everyone chooses to see the humanity in the people that are experiencing homelessness because they are someone's child, sibling, relative, or friend; and they ended up where they are due to the lack of support from their family, social lives, and teachers. Supporting programs that teach families how to engage with their child who may or may not be a sexual minority is one solution to support sexual minorities

and make them have a stronger sense of belonging. We also need to have better training for faculty in schools and have more inclusive sex education curriculums that include sexual minorities across all states so that every child has access to the knowledge and resources to live a healthier and safer life. In the United States sexual-minority youth are at more risk to experience homelessness due to three key factors, family neglect, aging out of youth protection programs that support sexual minorities, and the lack of social support and protections from bullying within the school system. If we want to create a more equitable and civil community, we must focus on the problems sexual-minority youth face so that they can contribute to the economy and feel a sense of belonging with society.

Sexual minorities are at a much greater risk of experiencing physical and mental health issues and are two times more likely to experience homelessness (Morton). A sexual minority is a group whose sexual identity, orientation, or practices differ from mainstream society. In the context of this essay, the term "sexual minority" encompasses the entire Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, 2-Spirit, etc. communities. Sexual minorities consist of 7.1% of the population in the United States (Jones). The negative impacts of social exclusion on a young person can result in increased risk for depression, anxiety, and suicide as well as increases in other mental health disorders like dementia with an increase of 50%, a 29% increased risk of heart disease, and a 32% increased risk of stroke (CDC 2021). As mentioned, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's policy analyst Nicholas Ray said that about 20-40% percent of the estimated 575,000 to 1.6 million homeless and runaway youth in the United States identify themselves as a sexual minority (Moore). Their studies also found that 50% of sexual minority youth experience a negative reaction when they disclose their sexuality to their families, and as a result 1 in 4 are kicked out from their home shortly afterwards (Moore).

In "'The Least Loved, That's What I Was': A Qualitative Analysis of the Pathways to Homelessness by LGBTQ+ youth," Côté Philippe-Benoit and Martin Blai provide a 3-tier framework using their interpretation of the theoretical concept of turning points to explain three trajectories that they believe leads sexual minorities into homelessness in Canada. To understand the theoretical concept of a turning point better, it often involves a particular event, experience, or new awareness that results in changes in the direction of a pathway or persistent trajectory over the long-term (Teruya C). These three trajectories consist of family neglect, aging out of youth protection programs with no safety net upon exiting, and fleeing from bullying in schools in search of support and freedom. When these are compounded together, they cause young people who are a sexual minority to isolate and separate themselves from their social networks at home, in their social lives, and at school. Although their analysis is based on Canadian sexual minorities, I've personally experienced the combined effect of these trajectories in my youth here in the U.S.

Family neglect is one of the first or main reasons young sexual minorities end up experiencing homelessness (Abramovich & Castellanos). This includes being kicked out of their home by their parents or guardians after their disclosure of identifying as a sexual minority, as well as choosing to leave for their own sense of safety and mistrust of their family members. One in four sexual minority youth are kicked out from their homes within the first few months after disclosing their orientation or gender identity (Moore). Some of these youth also experience or witness physical, psychological, or sexual abuse by their family members resulting in physical trauma and psychological problems such as low self-esteem, self-blame, guilt, and shame. These traumas physically and mentally trigger the process of social exclusion and isolations that then leads these youth into homelessness, according to Philippe-Benoit and Blai's research.

Aging out of youth protection services before getting adequate resources is the second trajectory that leads sexual minority youth to homelessness. Philippe-Benoit and Blai mention that the youth who turned 18 and aged out of the youth protection services "felt expelled" and that their time in the youth protection services hadn't allowed them to develop their own social networks outside of the services. One of those reasons for not establishing a social network was because of discrimination they received while in care based on their sexual orientation or their gender identity (Philippe-Benoit and Blai). According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System's 2020 data there were 407,493 children in the foster care system, and 64% (139,255) of those children were there due to neglect. This shows how prominent of an issue family neglect is for children in general here in the United States (AFCARS 2020). Studies have also found that approximately 35% of youth in foster care identify as a sexual minority (Youth.gov). This means that approximately 142,623 children in foster care are a sexual minority and 91,279 of them were in foster care due to their families rejecting them and kicking them out from their homes. With 7.1% of the population being a sexual minority, that means sexual minorities are five times more five times more represented in the foster care system compared to their representation in the general population. (Jones). In one study, 78% of the people who identify as a sexual minority in foster care ran away or were removed from their foster care placements because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, increasing the amount of sexual minority youth who are living homeless on the streets (Youth.gov).

Bullying that happens on school property is the third trajectory that causes sexual minorities to fall into the homelessness. Sexual minorities are exposed to many phobic behaviors in their schools, and the harassment the youth experience is attributed to being one of the main documented factors that lead them to homelessness (Phillippe-Benoit and Blai). The combination

of bullying at school and family neglect at home negatively impacts their learning outcomes in school and adds more psychological distress causing these youth to leave their homes in search of acceptance and a sense of freedom to be themselves. Sexual minorities are more likely to be bullied in school based on their sexual orientation or gender identity than those who are not. 32% of sexual minority students saying they've experienced bullying on school property, and 26.2% say they've been cyber bullied by their peers. In comparison, 17% of heterosexuals report they've been bullied on school property, and 13.5% have been cyber bullied. The bullying that sexual minorities face on school property causes approximately 13.5% to skip school altogether due to safety concerns (Stopbullying.gov). According to the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), more than 60% of students who are LGBT say they do not feel safe in schools because of their orientation, and 38.4% don't feel safe because of their gender expression (Murphy). Not having safety and support at home or at school increases the chance that sexual minorities will isolate because of their victimization, resulting in missed chances for those youth to create their own social networks or chosen family (Phillippe-Benoit and Blai).

Also, only 53% of the U.S. sexual minority population live in states that prohibit bullying based on a person's sexual orientation and gender identity, while 46% have no laws protecting them (lgbtmap.org). In addition to bullying that happens to sexual minorities on school property, there is a lack of training for faculty to help them better understand the needs these youth require. There is also a lack of community building programs that help sexual minority youth connect with others. Roughly half of the states in the United States have school policies that protect sexual minorities from bullying, and less than half of high schools had a Gay Straight Alliance club available for their students. Research also shows that among sexual minorities, 41% of students reported that their teachers had made homophobic jokes in class at some point and that

38.2% of students reported not feeling comfortable talking to school staff about queer issues (Murphy).

The three trajectories, family neglect, aging out of youth protection services, and fleeing bullying from school all stack up and negatively impact a sexual-minority youth's likelihood to create a chosen family or make connections with their peers. Some of the youth in Phillippe-Benoit and Blai's research mentioned that they felt like they were the least loved, most bullied, and the most unloved.

To help prevent sexual minorities from heading into a pathway that leads to homelessness, we need to create more programs that work directly with families and include training for faculty in schools to create more inclusive curriculums that support sexual minorities in all states. Family neglect is one of the most common reasons that sexual-minority youths and youth in general end up on a trajectory towards homelessness. Creating more programs that work directly with parents and families to better understand the trials sexual-minority youth experience in their day-to-day lives may reduce the amount of youth that end up on the streets due to isolating from their families, friends, and schools. Organizations like Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) should be made more known and available to all parents so that they can be more prepared to support their children and advocate for them. In the article "Coming Out: Information for Parents of LGBTQ Teens" by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the authors suggest that families play an important role to their children by advocating for safe spaces where their child can explore their interests without judgment or stereotypes and by supporting their children to have diverse friendships and participate in activities that have no expectations around genders. This allows their child to explore themselves and feel like they're being more accepted by their family, solidifying that relationship and building trust. They also

encourage parents to engage regularly in dialogue about what the child is interested in, what friend groups they've connected with, their romantic attractions or interests, and any bullying or teasing that may be taking place (Healthychildren.org). I think that by having consistent conversations with their child, parents will give them space to talk about what they are going through in their lives and allows the parents to better understand what their child needs or wants. The Healthychildren.org website continues with examples on how parents and family members can better support their child, and I really liked their final message at the end of the article:

"Even if you are having trouble understanding your child's identity or feelings, not withdrawing from your role as a parent is probably one of the most important ways to help a child continue to feel a sense of being cared for and accepted. Feeling loved has been shown to be critical to overall health and development of all children regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Many parents do need their own supports to help them understand and cope with their own difficult emotions and concerns during a child's "coming out." - AAP

Another solution to prevent young sexual minorities from heading into a pathway to homelessness is to incorporate more training for faculty and create more inclusive curricula that support sexual minorities in all states. The Guttmacher Institute, a leading research and policy organization committed to advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights worldwide, provides a lot of data on how many states do or do not include sexual education and HIV education in their article, "Sex and HIV Education." (Guttmacher.org). According to their data, only 39 states mandate sex education and/or HIV education, and of those states 26 mandate both, 2 mandate sex education, and 11 only mandate HIV education. What is more concerning is that only 17 states require that the content is medically accurate (Guttmacher.org). Their research also mentioned that 40 states require parents to be involved in their child's sex education, HIV education or both, and 36 of those allow parents the option to remove their child from the course completely. This option can become problematic because it allows unsupportive family members to control what their child learns, even if that information may benefit the child personally or

may change how they treat others who are a sexual minority. This allows the family to continue to neglect the needs of their child and allows for other children to stay ignorant about people that are not heterosexual which could increase bullying of sexual minorities. Another concerning data point in Guttmacher's research was that 4 states require that if teachers talk about homosexuality, it must be negative information and/or emphasize heterosexuality in a positive bias (Guttmacher.org). The Guttmacher research reflects how inconsistent our education system is state to state and is only creating loopholes for unsupportive faculty, family, and students to maintain negative bias towards sexual minorities. More comprehensive sex education in all schools not only benefits sexual minority youth, but all students. 41% of students from ages 18-19 say they know little to nothing about condoms, and 75% say they know little to nothing about contraceptive pills (Slater). Sexual minorities are more negatively affected by bad sexual-health outcomes than those who are not. More than two-thirds of new HIV infections and syphilis among people ages 13 to 29 are in men who identify as gay or bisexual. Among transgender people, HIV rates are more than four times the national average (Slater). Having a more inclusive and consistent sex education curriculum in all schools around the country could reduce STI transmissions, reduce bullying and stigma for sexual minorities, and create safer environments for all. To do this we need to intervene at a federal and at a state level to better support our educational systems and ensure that we are providing a curriculum for all people.

Using the theoretical concept of turning points mentioned in Phillipe-Benoit and Blai's research provided us with 3 trajectories that commonly push sexual minorities into experiencing homelessness. These were family neglect, aging out of youth protection services with no safety net upon exiting, and lastly fleeing bullying in schools in search of a sense of safety and belonging. It is important that we understand how necessary it is for people to feel like they

belong and have social networks that support them. Family neglect is a huge factor that leads sexual minorities to homelessness, and it is important that we learn how we can teach families to be more inclusive to their children so that we can reduce the number of children that end up on the streets or in foster care. We also need to create better exit strategies as sexual minorities age out of youth protection services so that they can be better equipped with social networks and resources before becoming independent. States across the country need to implement better policies, that reach all boards of education, that protect all students by making inclusive curriculum and equitable options for sexual minorities. Moving forward, I believe we need to fund more organizations like PFLAG, that help teach parents how to better advocate for their children so that their children feel safer and more connected to their family, friends, and social networks. I think that we also need to focus on creating a more inclusive and consistent sex education curriculum in all schools across the United States so that all youth get the same information that is also medically accurate.

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