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Queer Young People and Couchsurfing: Entry Pathways, Service Provision, and Maintenance Strategies

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Abstract: Previous research into queer or LGBTQ+ youth homelessness has relied upon samples recruited from shelters or the streets; such strategies might miss the experiences of young people who are couchsurfing. Couchsurfing is a growing form of homelessness in many countries, including Australia. Here, drawing upon interviews with 31 young queer people, aged 16–27, who are or have recently couchsurfed, we map out their entry into homelessness, their previous use of social services, and their strategies for maintaining accommodation while couchsurfing. Respondents typically entered homelessness following a complex array of factors including deteriorating mental health, escalating family alienation, and stigmatisation following coming out. Once couchsurfing, most young people did not access services as they did not view themselves as homeless. Those who did were often told they were less of a priority given their roofed status. Finally, interviewees reported trading chores, rent, or sex to maintain housing. The difference between sex work and sexual exchange, as explained by young people, is also discussed. We conclude by suggesting a harm-reduction approach to understanding and serving young people.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; queer; youth; homelessness; couchsurfing

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1. Introduction

Young queer people are at a substantially greater risk of homelessness and housing precarity than their cis and heterosexual peers. Queer is an umbrella term that includes young people who are same sex and gender attracted or experience no attraction (e.g., a-, grey-, or demisexual), or whose gender identity does not match their gender assigned at birth (e.g., transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming [1,2]. Many studies have attempted to estimate the prevalence of queerness among young people experiencing homelessness, with ranges varying from 8–37% [3–5]. The majority of studies cluster around 15–30%, regardless of how the question was posed [3]. However, this is likely an underestimate. When estimating prevalence, much of the success rests on location and how young people experiencing homelessness are recruited. Ecker's systematic review remains the largest such gathering of research on queer youth homelessness and examined the prevalence across 29 studies with 30 different recruitment strategies. Of the 30 recruitment strategies used, the overwhelming majority of young people were recruited from shelters (n = 5), the streets (n = 4), or a combination of both (n = 15), with the remainder recruited from other community services (n = 3), hospitals (n = 2) or university campuses (n = 1). As Ecker notes, "what is lacking across the majority of studies is an attempt to capture the "hidden homeless," such as the provisionally accommodated or those at risk of homelessness" (p. 328) [3].

Chief among these forms of provisional accommodation is couchsurfing, or sofa hopping. Couchsurfing is temporarily staying with friends, friends' parents, extended family, neighbours, acquaintances, or strangers [6]. Couchsurfers are not protected by a lease and, as such, they have no protection against sudden and groundless eviction. Couchsurfing is characterised by frequent, forced mobility, with young people regularly moving between

houses and hosts [6,7]. Within Australia, and elsewhere, couchsurfing has been growing steadily. Between 2020–2021, 9893 people in Australia indicated they were couchsurfing when accessing services at a specialised housing service; the next year, the number had nearly tripled, with 26,946 people indicating they were couchsurfing at intake [8,9]. Couchsurfers are overwhelmingly young people; the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare reported that 49% of couchsurfers were between 15–24 years of age [6].

As a distinct form of homelessness, couchsurfing has also been associated with an elevated risk of poor mental health, including among sexual minority youth [10], and increased risk of preventable mortality [11] compared to stably housed peers. In one small study, seventy-percent of young couchsurfers met the threshold for very high levels of psychological distress on the Kessler 10 scale [7]. Young cis women, trans, and non-binary couchsurfers reported significantly higher psychological distress than young cis men [7]. Additionally, frequent mobility also increased a young person's psychological distress, with each move increasing a young person's distress by one-tenth of a point [7]. When asked what situations impact their mental health while couchsurfing, young people described hosts' expectations of what they should exchange for housing as the most detrimental. Young people also indicated that the instability that accompanies couchsurfing, lack of privacy, and feeling like a burden also contributed to worsening their mental health [12]. Interviewees noted that such experiences exacerbated feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation [12].

Such feelings of isolation may be made more acute by actual and perceived lack of support; couchsurfers traditionally do not view themselves as homeless and are less likely to access housing resources or use social services than young people who are sleeping rough or living in shelters [13–15]. This disengagement largely stems from young couchsurfers conflating homelessness with rooflessness. As they are roofed, young queer couchsurfers often reject the label of homeless and may not see housing programme as "for them" [15]. However, many jurisdictions, including Australia, employ a social rather than a physical definition of homelessness [16,17]. Homelessness is tied, then, not to the presence or absence of a roof, but instead the presence or absence of a space in which a young person has autonomy and control over, such as a room, apartment, or house [17]. A couch or mattress in a living room, where a young person has no privacy or ability to alter the space, then, meets the definition of homelessness in many jurisdictions.

Despite these negative qualities, couchsurfing should also be framed as an important harm-reduction strategy for queer youth. Shelters have traditionally been heavily gendered and binary spaces, divided on the basis of genitalia [18,19]. Young queer people, especially those who are non-binary or trans, may elect to couchsurf to avoid forced disclosures or confrontations about the legitimacy of their gender identity [2]. Studies across three countries—the United States, Australia, and New Zealand—have found queer youth are more likely to live out-of-shelter, in other forms of temporary housing [2,20,21]. These disparities are quite stark; for example, 24% of queer youth who had experienced homelessness in New Zealand and 30% in Australia, respectively, reported couchsurfing, compared to 6% (NZ) and 5% (AUS) who were living in shelters or sleeping rough (4% and 10%) [2,20].

The potential for confrontations over their gender identity or sexuality within shelters or other housing services makes young queer people want to further avoid these sites. Such conflicts echo the traditional pathways into homelessness for queer youth. Previous research has established that queer youth enter homelessness following rejection from their families, with this narrative especially common among trans and non-binary young people [4,22–24]. Mental health, addiction, and child safety involvement were also common routes into homelessness for young queer people [3,4]. Yet, entry routes into couchsurfing may be subtly different. For example, when examining the pathways from child safety involvement into homelessness, the author found that young people began couchsurfing very early in the investigative process to avoid confrontation at home and that couchsurfing arrangements were often explicitly or tacitly encouraged by child safety officers who viewed staying with friends or neighbours as a safer option [25].

Regardless of how they begin couchsurfing, once homeless, young queer people may undertake multiple strategies to maintain or secure temporary housing or shelter. As noted, young people considered such expectations or exchanges as the most stressful part of couchsurfing [12]. Research on how young queer people maintain such housing has disproportionately focused on sex work and exchange—especially among trans women and gay men [26–30], while research on cisgender young women has drawn out sexual exchange and relationship continuation as dominant strategies [31,32].

Couchsurfing, and its importance to queer youth, then also raises questions about what is known about queer youth homelessness. Previous research has established that the couchsurfing experience is distinct from sleeping rough because of the accompanying characteristics (frequent mobility), the most common stressors (host expectations, feeling like a burden, and lack of privacy), and the disengagement from services. As most studies on entry or maintaining precarious housing have primarily recruited through shelters or on the streets, little is known about the unique pathways through homelessnesss that accompany couchsurfing. Young queer people who couchsurf, then, may have different entry pathways as well as strategies for maintaining their housing than those who live in shelters, on the streets, or are attached to other community programs. For example, do young queer people enter directly into couchsurfing, or tun to this option after experiencing rejection from shelters? By drawing upon a sample of young people who were overwhelmingly disengaged from social services, we may be able to better understand the barriers to seeking support that young queer people encounter. In this exploratory paper, we draw upon interviews with 31 young queer people who are couchsurfing to discuss the stressors that led to their homelessness and what strategies they used to maintain that housing once couchsurfing. We then discuss these findings within the context of existing research on queer homelessness, to identify how couchsurfing may be similar or distinct to other forms of homelessness.

2. Methods

2.1. Recruitment

Initially, starting in December 2019, interviewers met with young people face-to-face and conducted place-based recruitment at youth services, schools, and universities. With the spread of COVID-19, Australian universities suspended face-to-face research. Instead, recruitment moved to social media. Previous research has found that most young people who are homeless are well-connected to the internet and use social media both for emotional and tangible support [33,34]. Advertisements were run on Facebook and Instagram, with specifications on age and geographic location (Figure 1). The advertisement was visible to young people under age 30 who lived within 50 km of Brisbane, Logan, Ipswich, Toowoomba, Gold Coast, and Noosa, Queensland, as well as Hervey Bay, New South Wales, a town right over the Queensland-New South Wales border. Social media recruitment was successful with the advertisement reaching over 25,297 people; 97 young people messaged about participating; 65 completed interviews; and of those, 31 identified as queer. That final sample of 31 was the basis for this paper.

All messages were pre-screened for eligibility which was the same across recruitment methods. Eligible participants were under age 25 and were comfortable conducting the interview in English. The upper age limit of 30 was selected for targeted potential participants, as recommended by our CAG (see next paragraph). Most social media sites require a user to be age 13 to join, so younger users may alter their birth year. Two participants revealed during the interview, and after pre-screening, that they were 27. After discussing with the CAG, these two interviews were retained as both young people did couchsurf when they were under 25 (and in one case was still couchsurfing). The inclusion of these interviews did not change the themes developed during the coding or analysis.) Participants also acknowledged that they had couchsurfed for at least 2 weeks in the past 12 to 18 months. Participants who successfully passed the pre-screening were also assessed in their ability to provide affirmative consent on the day of the interview. Ethics approval

and a waiver of guardian consent was granted by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee. The project also benefitted from input and oversight from a Community Advisory Group (CAG). The CAG was comprised of people with lived experience, service providers, and other interested researchers who could assist with ethical or practical concerns that arose during the project.

Figure 1. Example of an advertisement run on Facebook and Instagram.

2.2. Interviews

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews occurred in private or semi-public locations of the young person's choosing, including in staff offices at youth service centres, empty classrooms, or in the on-campus cafeteria. Interviews conducted during COVID-19 restrictions were conducted either over the phone or via video conferencing, such as Zoom or MS Teams. Nearly all respondents preferred phone. During the interview, young people were asked about the stressors that existed in their life before couchsurfing, if life had improved or gotten worse once they started couchsurfing, and what they were stressed about now. Young people also were asked to describe their most recent couchsurfing situation, including their relationship to the host, the physical layout of where they were sleeping, and if they had to exchange anything to stay there. Young people were also asked if they "ever felt like you had to do something you did not want to do to stay at a place where you were couchsurfing?". If yes, they were asked to describe the situation. Finally, young people were asked about their connection to social services and what, if any, social services they used during couchsurfing. All interviews, regardless of recruitment style, lasted between 15 min and 2 h in length, with most averaging around 45–60 min. Young people received a voucher

for AUD 40 to a nationwide grocery chain. Young people who completed the interview by phone could indicate whether they wanted the voucher delivered electronically or by post. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

During this project, we strove to centre young people as experts on their own safety. Research with young people experiencing homelessness can be fraught with the potential for uncovering (through disclosure of abuse or violence) or causing harm (through mental distress). Simultaneously, what seems "safe" to a researcher or ethics committee may not be safe to a young queer person who has experienced systemic as well as interpersonal violence. Under our ethics application, ongoing, current abuse of underage children was to be reported to the Queensland Department of Children, Youth Justice, and Multicultural Affairs (DCYJMA). As part of informed consent, the interviewer explicitly discussed their obligations to report, what that meant, what would be reported, and what information would be supplied to authorities. Young people could ask questions about this process before the interview started. Additionally, young people and the interviewer completed a short mental health safety plan prior to the start of the interview. The plan prompted the young person to think about the steps they take to relax when they are stressed or anxious and why these steps were helpful. Some responses included sit outside under a tree, listen to music, go for a walk, or smoke. Interviewers were taught about non-judgemental affirmations to help guide their responses to safety planning. During tough parts of the interview, the interviewer could (and often did) review this plan with the young person before moving on. Finally, at the end of the interview, the interviewer could suggest or connect the young person with resources that were relevant to what was discussed. The involvement of the CAG meant that interviewers could often direct the young person to a specific person at these services rather than a general intake line, which many young people found especially helpful.

2.3. Analysis

Following their transcriptions, the interviews were analysed by a team which included the author, interviewers, and CAG members. CAG members had lived experience in couch-surfing and were able to provide nuance and contextual value to the review of transcripts. Transcripts were reviewed line-by-line, using a grounded theory approach. The group met repeatedly to review emerging themes, discuss, and refine. Out of this process, a core set of major themes and challenges was identified. For this paper, the author returned, and resumed this practice of refinement, but using a more inductive framework. Drawing upon previous research on LGBTQ+ people's entry into and strategies for maintaining housing [4], the author created a list of potential primary thematic codes. The transcripts were reviewed and coded. Though CAG members were not involved in the second round of coding for this paper, the author had multiple informal conversations with queer CAG members that helped to further shape the analysis. Transcripts that did not fit under existing categories or themes were revisited. Using these transcripts as the basis, new codes were formed. This process was repeated for each section of the paper until all variation was described.

3. Findings

3.1. Que(er)ying the Sample

Thirty-one of the young people who were interviewed identified as queer, including nine who were non-binary, gender fluid, and/or trans. Online recruitment accounted for 24 interviewees, with the remainder coming from place-based recruitment at youth services (n = 5) or schools (n = 2) before COVID-19. Most queer participants were cisgender, bisexual women. Participants described their sexuality in many ways, ranging from "bi-curious" to "I'm just attracted to all people, regardless of gender". Similar descriptions accompanied gender identity; Mercedes (all names are pseudonyms) described herself as "fem-leaning, I like she/her pronouns" and eagerly shared that "I'm still figuring [my gender identity] out, but I'm on hormones which is great". A few minutes later into the interview, Mercedes

returned to the question about whether she was trans or cisgender and affirmed "yes, I'm trans".

3.2. Leaving Home and Entering Couchsurfing

While participants were not explicitly asked about what prompted them to leave their childhood homes, most provided some summary. For many these prompts were the dominant stressors that existed in their life before they began couchsurfing. Consistent with past research, young people reported that they started couchsurfing after experiences of family violence. This family violence often played into mental health concerns that would prompt the young person to leave. Yasmin, a 17-year-old bi-curious woman, summarised the experience of many young people, explaining "Long story short, family violence led to a huge mental breakdown on my behalf, and my parents' behalf. And I opted to leave-slash-left".

As Yasmin summarises, the events that led to a young person leaving were rarely neatly categorised as *just* mental health, abuse, addiction, or familial dissolution; instead, in many cases, the situations that young people left were representative of many personal and intergenerational traumas coming to a head. For example, Malcolm, a 22-year-old gay man, left home after his brother's suicide and his family's reaction to his mental health:

> My parents kicked me out. It was a disagreement over me taking antidepressants and yes, I drink too much for my own good, which is not good with the antidepressants, but…sober and miserable? […] I have a lot of trauma from earlier in life and stuff like that, but I think the main thing that was weighing on my mind, around the time I got kicked out, was my brother killed himself. And so it was around his anniversary that I started getting really bad.

Malcolm's experience was emblematic of many of the young people we spoke to. Their mental health worsened as they experienced new trauma, exacerbated by a lack of support when seeking treatment (or lack of access to treatment), and they then began self-medicating with alcohol or other substances. This use further worsened relationships with their family and led to them being expelled from home. Rachel, a 21-year-old pansexual woman, also discussed this same pathway, noting how her worsening mental health also led to a family breakdown:

> I was living with my parents and then my older brother died, and everything just kind of went to shit in the house […] Since I was 14, I've had the major depression diagnosis and anxiety as well as OCD. So I've always kind of been a stress head, but it was kind of like a breaking point and my [relationship with my parents] went really bad. And it just wasn't a good environment for me to be in. After I started couchsurfing things got better in the sense that I wasn't stressing about [that] stuff, but worse…in that I turned to drugs and drinking all the time with the people that were in the house. I was smoking weed all the time to just be numb, so I didn't feel anything. And then drinking when I couldn't get any weed. [That was] the environment in the house…[Everyone's behaviour] kind of fed into one another. We all were just like a house of misfits.

For both Malcolm and Rachel, not only was there a sequence of events and behaviour that further exacerbated their mental health, but in both situations, parents struggled to provide support. In Rachel's case, her parents eventually dropped her off at an inpatient mental health clinic, whereas in Malcolm's, arguments over his substance use and taking antidepressants (which were conflated with substances more broadly) intensified. These events led to both young people becoming homeless.

Additionally, Rachel's final comment, that she lived in a "house of misfits," was reflective of many of the housing situations that young people moved into. Rather than moving into more stable home environments, many moved into share houses, with friends, or friendly adults. These were not always stable or safe environments. Lisa, a 27-year-old bisexual woman, initially moved in with her girlfriend, her girlfriend's mom, and "[thirteen]

other teenagers who'd either run away from home, their parents had kicked out. . . [or] weren't satisfied with their life at home [. They] thought we could give them something better". All fifteen teenagers were soon expelled from the house. Similarly, Renae, an 18-year-old-bisexual woman who left home when she was 16, noted that she first started couchsurfing during a child safety intervention to address ongoing sexual abuse she was experiencing at home. As the DCYJMA was having difficulty finding a suitable placement, she initially stayed with her extended family, which eventually led to her couchsurfing with "friends of friends". Eventually, she stayed with her taekwondo instructor, a placement that lasted until he sexually assaulted her. When she tried to bring charges against her former instructor, the pressure—and lack of support—was too much. She ultimately dropped both cases. Even those environments that were not outrightly abusive or exploitative, such as Rachel's share house, often strongly encouraged drug or substance use as part of living there.

Though the majority of young people described the circumstances leading to their leaving as related to family violence or dysfunction, mental health or substance use (or all three), five young people discussed how their gender identity or sexuality played a role in leaving home. Mercedes, a 21-year-old fem-leaning trans person who was plurisexual, described being kicked out of her home: "I had just turned 16 and I decided to go out on a date with a boy. Oh guess how bad that decision was!" At the time, Mercedes was still male-presenting; the (presumed) same-gender date caused a "massive fight" with her parents that resulted in her leaving permanently.

The disclosure of their gender identity or sexuality could lead to an increase in abuse or hostility in a young person's home, as described by Mercedes, and then the worsening of their mental health. That worsening mental health—and seeking to care for themselves—is what pushed these young people into couchsurfing. These young people were more likely to use the language of "leaving" rather than being "kicked out" in describing these decisions. SJ, a 21-year-old non-binary, trans, pan-romantic, grey-sexual person, summarised how being closeted at home contributed to their worsening mental health:

> I think [my sexuality and gender identity] definitely added to [my own suicidality] as well, because it was very hard to talk to my family about that. They obviously didn't want to [talk about it], especially about [my] gender.

For SJ, couchsurfing had allowed them to then begin focusing on exploring their gender identity and seeking support; the ability to not be closeted eventually also improved their mental health.

However, moving into more supportive environments when couchsurfing was not always guaranteed. Many young people were moving in with friends or extended family members and realised, upon arrival, that they knew very little about that family member's reaction to gender diversity. Elliot, a 19-year-old trans man who was attracted to people regardless of gender, explained how his movement into couchsurfing had not allowed him to fully exit the closet:

> I'm trans and my family is not very supportive. My parents would occasionally get upset, get pretty verbally abusive. . . sometimes it would get really intense, and I just didn't feel safe, so I left for a while. [. . .] [When I started couchsurfing], I stayed with my uncle. He is quite supportive and that was a real positive; a relief to go there. But my grandparents [who I stayed with next] and I had discussed [being trans] with them in the past and they weren't as supportive, so I just decided to take on the former identity. I assumed it would be safer for me.

Elliot was not alone in navigating the newfound precarity of homelessness and revealing his gender identity. Mercedes had moved in with a friend's family, only to realise they were "crazy in the Liberal body" (The Liberal party is the conservative party in Australia, and since the early-2000s has repeatedly passed laws and encouraged rhetoric that restricted the rights of people who are queer) [35]), and that "[Living with them] was like

Stockholm syndrome because they were voting and donating to the exact people that make policies that put me in the situation I am in".

Beyond contending with decisions about remaining in or abandoning the closet, queer young people also discussed how the threat of housing insecurity itself became a form of abuse by their parents, both threatened or acted upon while couchsurfing. Liam, a 23-year-old bisexual male, described how his mother used fear of homelessness to keep him at home:

> I have been in and out of home with my mom. It [was] a pretty abusive living situation. [...] I didn't have a lot of freedom and I felt like I could be kicked out [by my mom] at any moment, always being threatened to be kicked out of the house. [...] It's like she's on a fine wire, you can't say anything that disagrees with her, you set her off, and she's instantly angry. [...] She's very judgmental about [my] sexuality... so I felt like couldn't really be myself or bring my friends home or be around my mom. She's not very accepting of my friends, [my] relationships, and stuff.

Eventually, Liam's mental and physical deterioration led him to leave. He discussed how couchsurfing replicated the same instability that his mom had stoked a fear of and often framed couchsurfing as something that made him feel guilty. This led to a cycle where he would anger his mom, leave or be kicked out, couchsurf, then return home to live with his mom, seeing this as the most stable option, before the cycle would "just repeat for years". Liam discussed his frustration over not being able to find more secure or stable housing, while simultaneously recognising that his mom's home offered neither. This cycle of home to couchsurfing to home was punctuated by his mom "begging" him to return and promising to not kick him out again in the future. Liam realised the cycle and felt frustrated, but also had no better options.

For Tabitha, a 19-year-old bisexual woman, her parents more actively manipulated her housing as she couchsurfed:

> My relationship with my family was pretty bad. Both of my parents are alcoholics so that's the main reason [I left home]. [...] One of the places I was living was going to be long-term but my mum started rumours that the guy was a paedophile, so I had to leave because he was trying to get custody of his son and I didn't want that to come up in court or anything. He'd never done anything [to me]. Yeah, [my mom] played a pretty big part in why a lot of places didn't work out.

Tabitha, unlike Liam, was more confident in leaving, but lived in a relatively small town. As such, to continue exerting control over her, her mom started rumours about the people she was staying with or would call up hosts directly and tell them Tabitha was trouble or a bad influence. This often led to Tabitha's friends' parents encouraging her to leave. The situation finally ended when Tabitha moved to Brisbane, the capital city region of Queensland, and away from her mom's influence. This decision, though, further put her at risk as she initially had to stay with strangers in Brisbane and was without social support.

3.3. Couchsurfing as an Alternative to Formal Support

Importantly, couchsurfing was not simply opportunistic for many young people, but instead part of a conscious, if limited, choice about what form of precarity worked best for them or their circumstances. Often, such circumstances highlighted the multiple identities that young queer people occupied. Dorothy, a 23-year-old woman who was questioning her sexuality, began couchsurfing at age 16. As a foreign-born citizen who was not yet a permanent resident in Australia, she avoided all social support services believing she was not eligible. Couchsurfing was, in her opinion, the safest option that existed, compared to sleeping rough. Tabitha also thought couchsurfing afforded her more control over her situation and she started couchsurfing after staying at a youth hostel conflicted with her work schedule:

> [T]he only support [a local community group] offered was a youth hostel and I really, really did not want to do that. You have to share a room with two other people, which I did not want to do. And I was working at KFC at the time, so I finished work at like 9:00 or 10:00 at night. They had a curfew of 6:00 PM, even if you had a job.

Tabitha was one of several young people who declined offered housing because the options were inappropriate or did not fit with their lives. Couchsurfing offered them more independence and freedom of movement. Similarly, Rachel noted that when she looked into housing, "the only thing they had was a halfway house with alcoholics or people escaping domestic violence and drugs. I just knew that if I put myself back into a house with people that did drugs, I would do drugs. And that was the only option. There wasn't an option for like reduced price housing or anything". The lack of suitable affordable housing meant that Rachel continued to couchsurf, even after securing disability payments. Other young queer people found that some shelters were unable to provide support on the basis of the young person's age or mental health needs. Sidney, a 22-year-old bisexual woman, actively chose to couchsurf after she attempted to stay in adult shelters (as an 18-year-old):

> Often you're going into shelters with people who are adults, and it's actually quite intimidating. I stayed in an adult shelter and I got into things that I shouldn't have…I think they need something for young adults. […] [B]eing around people who are in their forties, fifties, it's intimidating. […] I've called homeless supports before […] and I feel like their attitude is just "it's another kid. This is another young person". Like I explained [and they were like] "Well, you shouldn't have done that. You shouldn't have done that to your parents". And it's like, I have a mental illness that I can't control, but I'm learning. […] [The homeless programs] didn't have any sensitivity to it. I feel like maybe they need a bit more education around mental illness, and not just depression and anxiety, but I'm talking these big diagnoses too. Bipolar, borderline personality disorder, schizophrenia, because these are real illnesses that kids are facing. [Maybe] there'd be a bit more compassion as well if they had that education.

Such "big diagnoses" were common within our sample—as well as the "small" diagnoses, such as anxiety and depression, which young people commonly noted were exacerbated by couchsurfing.

Interviews with young people suggest that the decision to move directly into couchsurfing often resulted from reviewing shelter requirements or conditions. Overall, shelter use among the sample was uncommon. Shelter use was primarily reported by cis queer individuals (those who were sexually but not gender diverse). Only one of the young people who identified as trans and/or non-binary had stayed at a shelter. That person had a good experience, noting the faith-based shelter allowed them to stay at the shelter according to their gender, provided them with a private room, and also was excellent at addressing their ongoing medical needs. However, the program offered no aftercare and the young person eventually "timed out". None of the other gender diverse young people had attempted to use or secure housing in a shelter. Instead, gender diverse young people were more likely to report attending LGBTQ+-specific services. These services were less likely to offer accommodation, yet young people still spoke very highly of the caseworkers and staff who assisted them, noting that staff's lived experience, particularly with homelessness and couchsurfing, often made them more attentive to addressing the concerns that young people shared:

> [At the queer youth service] I was able to connect a lot with [this caseworker]. They go by she, her and they and them. It really helped to have a lot of workers there…that had life experience, of not only mental health, but also LGBTQ+ issues. And there was a few too that had dealt with homelessness. […] A lot

> of the workers there helped to give me that strength to get out of that toxic environment [at home]. (SJ)

Young queer couchsurfers also faced barriers securing formal support and housing *because* they were couchsurfing. Interviewees repeatedly recounted how they did not feel homeless enough (and therefore, were unworthy of seeking support):

> [My attitude] was very much like "I'm not homeless. I'm just having a rough time right now". I was in this state of denial. "I wasn't homeless. Everything was going to work out fine. I just needed a job. I'm not homeless. This is just a break between jobs". I was stuck in that mentality. [. . .] "I have places to stay with my friends. I'm not homeless because I have places to stay". [I would say] stuff like that [to myself]. (Carla, 19-year-old bisexual woman)

> There have been a few church groups [that I reached out to for help with food]. [. . .] I've just always felt a little bit uncomfortable about it for some reason. I'm not really sure why. [. . .] I think it's shame in some aspects, which sound so stupid. And also, I've felt like I know a lot of people and I have always managed to find somewhere to go or somewhere to stay, even if it's my car. It's not as though I've ever had to sleep out on a street or anything like that. I've probably been a lot more fortunate than other people. There's always been somewhere for me. (Ebony, a 20-year-old woman with fluid sexuality)

Such sentiments, that they were "not homeless," were often reenforced if they *did* reach out. Social service agencies deprioritised young people who were couchsurfing, noting that they did have a roof. SJ summarised one such experience in trying to secure a spot in a transitional housing program:

> [I went to a homeless support service] because a friend of mine had been in their temporary housing program for a bit. I applied and it took quite a long time to hear anything. At the same time, it was quite hard because I was like "Yeah, I can't really hold on because obviously I'm not really in any stable housing". I was hoping [I would be accepted] then I heard I hadn't gotten in because there was no space. [. . .] [When I asked why I was not a priority for housing] they were very general, like "Well you're couchsurfing so you have somewhere, like you have a couch". [. . .] I wasn't completely homeless. I think that was the main way they phrased it.

Others encountered practical issues when trying to register for support or services that stemmed from couchsurfing. Jane, a 22-year-old pansexual woman, noted that she had tried to secure Youth Allowance, only to be asked for a residential address. (Centrelink or Youth Allowance are both terms used by young people to refer to Australia's social support payment. The payment is fortnightly and available to people who are unable to work because of their age or disability, or to provide basic support while looking for work. Young people under age 18 especially struggle to secure Youth Allowance as they must prove they are no longer being supported by parents or a guardian. This caused considerable difficulties for the young people we interviewed who often were no longer speaking with their parents and therefore could not secure the necessary documentation without first connecting to support services. In other situations, parents would deliberately withhold or provide conflicting information, ensuring their children were unable to qualify for Youth Allowance.) When she explained she did not have a residential address, the worker continued to advise her to put where she was staying. Jane tried to explain that she did not know how long she would be able to stay at this location, but the worker continued to insist and then became annoyed when Jane refused. Eventually, Jane left and was not able to secure Youth Allowance support.

3.4. Maintaining Housing While Couchsurfing

Once a young queer person began couchsurfing—either out of choice or circumstance—they developed various strategies for securing and maintaining their accommodations.

Such strategies did not always work long-term; many interviewees still reported frequent mobility. Unexpectedly, when asked if they exchanged anything to secure housing, thirteen of the 31 young people—the second largest proportion—indicated they paid some rent (Figure 2). (Several noted that they had also paid rent at shelters or youth housing. In many cases, rent payments to shelters or youth housing came directly from Centrelink. When a young person was not eligible for Centrelink, for whatever reason, they were often expected to pay for lodging with a set proportion of their income.) The amount of rent paid varied wildly. Tabitha initially agreed to pay rent to a neighbour, only to be shocked by the requested amount:

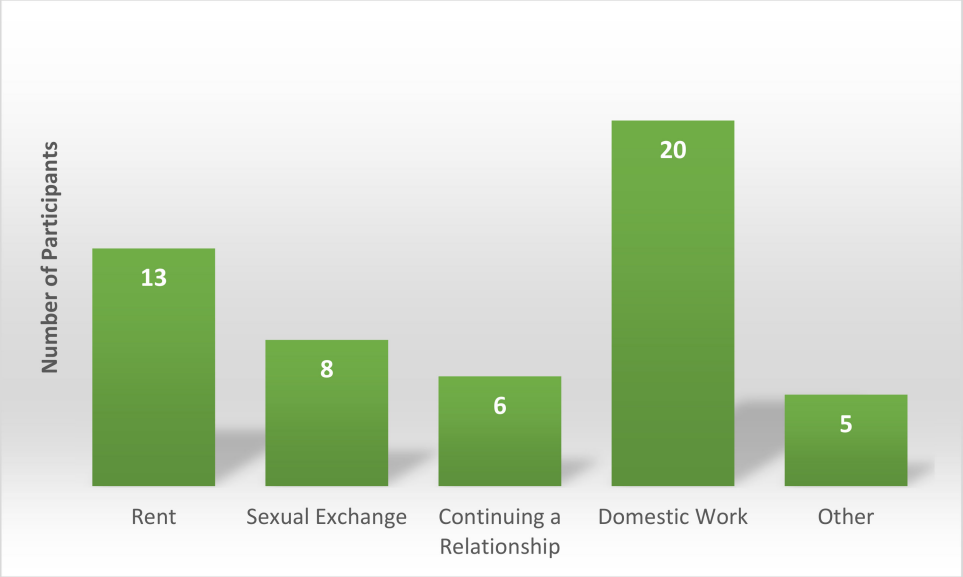

Figure 2. What was exchanged for couchsurfing. The totals here do not equal the sample size as many young people exchanged multiple items or services to secure housing over the course of their couchsurfing. "Other" included providing transportation, exchanging drugs, or doing grocery shopping.

> When I moved in, I found out that she wanted me to pay $300 a week in rent (The median price to rent a room in a shared house Brisbane, Queensland in 2020 was $180/week.). [. . .] I don't pay that now [for a private granny flat]. That's a lot. I hadn't yet been selected for Centrelink because I was only 15. [. . .] I was working at KFC, so I was maybe getting $200 a week on a good week, because you can legally only work 12 hours [if you are] grade 10 or under 16. I was doing 12 hours a week most of the time, except for school holidays.

Remarkably, Tabitha did pay this exorbitant amount of rent for weeks. Despite this, she was sleeping on a couch, did not have a private room, and was not offered a lease. Once she moved, her next hosts also expected rent, but "only $50 a week, which was great and just doing basic chores and stuff". Unfortunately, this family soon became quite "manipulative" and attempted to open a savings account where Tabitha's government benefits would be deposited. Upon discovering this, she left.

Even among those young people who paid more standard market rates, they often felt that they had minimal power to negotiate rent or renter protections, especially as their payments were not always regular. Bronwyn, a 19-year-old bisexual woman, summarised this difficulty:

> When I lost my job [. . .], I didn't have much money, so I couldn't really offer much rent. It was more just relying on compassion for a little bit, which runs out very fast. Then I ended up getting approved for Centrelink and that helped me be able to pay rent. But for some of the houses, for my friend's house, I was paying

> 150 a week and I didn't even have a room. It was just people taking advantage of you [because] you have no other option.

Others agreed, and noted that while rent was helpful, the presence of an additional person in the house was frequently a burden for already cash-strapped friends or families. Dorothy explained "I think financially just having an extra person. . . [contributed to the host] building up a little resentment because I didn't pay her. We had agreed on [me not paying]. . . but [she had] forgotten and [not paying rent] became a big issue".

This fear of being a burden (and then being kicked out as a result) was a constant theme in the interviews with young people. As such, those who were unable to pay rent strove to make themselves invaluable around the home in other ways, usually through domestic work, including babysitting, cooking, cleaning, and other household tasks. Many young people actively secured housing through such arrangements. Narelle, a 27-year-old bisexual woman, explained that she offered cleaning and babysitting through a local single moms' group on Facebook. She explained that these exchanges were common in the group, and now, as a person with more stable and secure housing, she herself regularly welcomed and hosted young parents who were couchsurfing in the same situation. Similarly, Ebony exchanged chores for a room, along with a small amount of money to cover utilities:

> I do the gardening and things [. . .] I pay them $50 for the week that I'm there for electricity and water and things. I pay that when I get there. They've got quite big gardens, every morning I let out the chickens and feed the chickens and do the garden for the morning. And in the afternoon, [I] water the gardens again. There's a routine that I have there. Even though they manage to do those things when I'm not there, I think they enjoy not having to worry about it for a little while.

This theme—of offering services or care that were otherwise a luxury of sorts—was repeated by other young people who strove to ensure they were actively contributing towards not just the household but the wellbeing of their friends or hosts. Rhea similarly took it upon themself to look after their friend:

> I felt incredibly guilty for the fact that [my friend was] doing so much for me to help me in my situation. I ended up saying "I'll clean, I'll do this, I'll do that". Especially at the first house, my friend who helped me, she was so busy. I decided at the time that she wasn't eating properly [and] I want[ed] to help her. [I cooked] her breakfast with bits and pieces, as she had no fridge. Although she said that she didn't like being looked after. . . [I think] she appreciated it at the same time.

Rhea's actions and motivation can be framed within the context of care work, labour that promotes the minding and ministration of others [36]. Usually, care work describes labour devoted to children, the elderly or the disabled. However, for queer participants, much of the care work that they provided was protecting and promoting the wellbeing of their peers—other young people who were also precariously housed, had mental health or addiction issues, and were navigating living on their own; other "misfits," as Rachel described.

While domestic work was most commonly exchanged among our participants, eight of the young people we spoke with also exchanged sex to secure housing. Those who had done both noted that sex work and sexual exchange were quite distinct experiences. Evonne, a 20-year-old bisexual woman, found Seeking Arrangements, a website that allows sugarbabies to find daddies, was a lifesaver when her mental health, addiction, and housing instability led her to burn out:

> I [found] a very big magical thing. I ended up on a site, I don't know if you've heard of it, Seeking Arrangements. Basically you meet all these men and you could get money for doing different things. You could go out to a simple lunch date with them, and you would get paid. [. . .] Even just going on dinner dates. It's gotten me like an extra 200 in my pocket per hour. [. . .] I was like "why not?" Everybody compliments my looks, so I used that to my advantage. [. . .] A lot of

> the time, that's what I would do on nights out as well. I would dress myself up and get free drinks. I would find the one person that would buy me drinks all night and stay with them. I guess that's how I made my survival in that time that I wasn't working because I had no income.

Evonne found sex work as a crucial opportunity to make money that was not as taxing as other work. Prior to this, Evonne mentioned she was working four jobs simultaneously and often getting less than four hours of sleep a night. More importantly, she was able to take the skills she had used in sex work and used these skills to secure other temporary housing. Malcolm had also differentiated between sex work and sexual exchange, but took a more cynical view of the differences:

> I've done sex work on my terms before, and [it's] very different in comparison to when I have no choice. [. . .] It's a power imbalance. . . when I'm in control of sex work, I can dictate the terms as such, so I can dictate how much and for what I'll do and all that sort of stuff. [. . .] I could make particular demands and set particular boundaries. When I am [couchsurfing], I am not in the position where I can be picky about money. I just take what I can get. And because of that, I have very little say in what actually happens or how much I get, because [. . .] they're doing me a favour. . . They're helping me out so we'll do what they want. [. . .] It's a weird paradox because. . . they're exploiting me [and] I rely on that exploitation. Like I'm a young, vulnerable, homeless boy and it is pretty twisted to take advantage of that.

Malcolm considered how the lack of housing—or control over housing—negated his ability to negotiate or set boundaries. He was also consciously aware of how this exploitation was central to his ability to get housed; as he points out, the men he was sleeping with were not offering housing or support out of altruism. While Malcolm's clients were often providing money rather than housing, he also noted that they were aware of his housing precarity and used it to their benefits when negotiating. Malcolm would then use this money to secure more preferrable housing, both a mix of couchsurfing or staying in hotels. The money would often allow Malcolm to repair relationships with friends that he felt was strained or return to a location that he had previously liked.

Many other hosts, however, expected a certain *quid pro quo;* that sleeping in their house entitled them to sexual access. This experience was especially common among bisexual or queer women; almost all reported expected sexual exchange as part of couchsurfing:

> When you don't know anyone, sometimes you can feel coerced into doing sexual things with someone. That's the only thing I want to say. (Blanche, 18-years-old, bisexual woman)

> When I was first [couchsurfing], like when I was younger [17-years-old], I felt like I had to sleep with the person so I could stay there. And I did, so that I could. (Rachel)

> They wanted more out of me than I was willing to give sort of thing. [*Interviewer: like they wanted a sexual relationship and you didn't?*] Yeah. The pressure was definitely that [I should] say yes sort of thing. [. . .] Eventually I moved away from that person. (Jane)

> A lot of them would expect something in return for letting me stay with them *[Interviewer: Like sex? Is that what they were expecting?]* M-hmm [affirmative]. I would consider myself pretty hypersexual, so I would usually just go through with it, but there were a few times where I really didn't feel comfortable with the situation. I would have to go through with it anyway. [. . .] The whole thing would start with them saying "So what do I get in return"? (Renae)

As these quotes reveal, such sexual exchange did not meet the threshold of enthusiastic consent from both parties. All four young women noted that they did not want to have sex in all or many of the circumstances. Such exchange is better classified as sexual assault.

Malcolm also experienced this sexual quid pro quo noting he sometimes slept with hosts, even after he had paid to stay there: "I have hooked up with somebody on the grounds of feeling obligated to because I'm staying at their place. I've slept with some people I really didn't want to, but you do what you do". Echoing Malcolm's experience, the involved hosts—who in all of these circumstances were men in their late teens or early twenties—were also aware of the inherent power imbalance. This power imbalance was used as leverage in pressuring young people into sex. For bisexual women, as illustrated by Renae's quote, these experiences—and repeatedly saying yes—reinforced an internal narrative of hypersexuality, that made refusing future advances difficult.

The young people I spoke to all suggested that such exchanges were fleeting and short-lived, often lasting only a night—a stark contrast to maintaining relationships, a strategy that six young people reported. In these circumstances, a young person was living, most often, with a romantic partner. As the relationship began to deteriorate, the threat of losing housing meant the young person began investing more time and effort into maintaining that relationship. This often involved not only sexual, but emotional labour that many resented. Liam summarised the experienced:

> I spent probably three months with a girlfriend that I wasn't happy with just because that was my bed. [. . .] Having to give that emotional labour and emotional time to them, even when it's really unhealthy for you and you don't want that. I'd have to take my girlfriend out on dates and stuff, and deal with her abuse. I wasn't feeling it. I felt like I had no choice.

Eventually Liam moved back home with his mother to escape the relationship, and the cycle of her using housing precarity to exert control over him resumed. Additionally, many of the young people we spoke to encountered their first romantic relationships within the context of couchsurfing. The dynamics of couchsurfing itself could make discerning what was "actual" romantic interest difficult for relationship novices, as Aaron, a 20-year-old trans man who was straight, explained:

> The first place that I was staying at, that friend, I did make the mistake of ending up in a relationship with her for a bit and I guess, because of that, I sort of felt like I couldn't end the relationship. Otherwise that would have been really awkward because I was living in her home [. . .] At first I wanted a relationship with her, but then. . . a few weeks into it, realised that it was purely because her and I just spent so much time together. We just had a close bond. And I think I sort of mistook it for having feelings for her. I did end up ending the relationship but I had anxiety about doing it because. . . I was potentially risking. . . having a roof over my head.

Age and queerness may have intersected in these situations, where young queer people, like Aaron, were approaching the world through their authentic selves for the first time. Differentiating between recognising relationships that were supportive and those that were romantic became even more fraught when housing was involved. Older teens, like Liam, could recognise they wanted the relationship to end, but similarly struggled with how to extract themselves without being forced to leave. In these circumstances, continuing these relationships mirrored the abusive or dysfunctional family relationships that many young people had left.

4. Discussion

Couchsurfing is an increasingly common form of "hidden homelessness". Among our sample, 48% (n = 31) of young people who were couchsurfing identify as queer and 14% (n = 9) identify as trans or gender diverse. This is a higher proportion than what has been reported in other research on youth homelessness, suggesting that queer young people may be more likely to engage in couchsurfing than previously thought. This underscores the importance of including couchsurfers in discussions about queer youth homelessness and engaging alternative recruitment strategies (such as using social media). The young

queer people we spoke with identified the various ways that they became homeless, how they began couchsurfing, and how they attempted to maintain their accommodations.

Our study found that the young people in our sample became homeless as a result of a complex array of factors, rather than a singular experience of abuse or alienation. These findings challenge the notion of a "single narrative" approach to explaining queer youth homelessness, which suggests that queer youth face higher rates of homelessness solely because of their queerness [23]. While some participants did discuss the role that their sexuality or gender identity played in their decision to leave home, the majority focused on their mental health. Previous research has consistently shown that queer youth, regardless of age, are disproportionately affected by mental health issues, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety, as well as "big diagnoses" such as borderline personality disorder, schizophrenia, and persistent suicidal ideation [37–41]. Furthermore, research has also shown that poor mental health and severity of self-harm both increased the likelihood that a young person will engage in couchsurfing [42].

Young queer people who engage in couchsurfing often did so by choice, given the limited options available to them. While most participants acknowledged that couchsurfing is not ideal and that they do not want to continue doing it, it was a preferable option compared to other forms of temporary housing which had too many restrictions or only served specific populations. Thus, many young people who couchsurfed were familiar with social support or shelters in their area. Couchsurfing was not a last resort or a temporary accommodation style between shelter stays. Instead, it was a preferred option within a (very) limited range of choices. For many young people, the decision to couchsurf fits within a harm reduction framework. Harm reduction suggests that rather than ending a practice (e.g., driving) that users instead make the experience safer (e.g., wear a seatbelt, drive the speed limit, etc.). Couchsurfing posed substantial risks for young people, but still provided space for autonomy. Couchsurfing allowed young queer people to connect with their community, address their mental health needs, continue working, and save money (compared to traditional renting). Within this framework, housing stability more closely resembles a scale [43]. Young queer people, with different life circumstances, may be willing to accept different levels of housing instability to feel more secure in other aspects of their life (e.g., maintaining employment, reducing exposure to violence, or coming out).

Unfortunately, couchsurfing sometimes became the only choice when young queer people were de-prioritised from services if or when they tried to get help. Service providers reinforced the notion that young queer people who were couchsurfing were not "completely homeless". Support staff, in many types of programs, may want to adopt a harm reduction approach when serving young people who are couchsurfing and evaluating the risks they face. Brisbane Youth Service trialled an intensive case management model for young people who were couchsurfing that also included a risk assessment tool [13]. The tool assessed the overall risk presented in the housing situation by considering the environment, including sleeping conditions, access to privacy, hosts' expectations, and presence or absence of substances. The tool can be useful in helping both service providers (and young people) recognise priorities for intervention.

Indeed, couchsurfing is not without risks and drawbacks, including exploitation and abuse from family and hosts. Our findings highlight the fact that couchsurfing itself can expose queer young people to continued familial abuse. The fact that some participants continued to experience abuse from their families while couchsurfing is particularly disturbing and warrants further research. Young queer people who couchsurfed also expressed concern over hosts' expectations. We were especially interested to hear queer youth differentiate between sex work and sexual exchange when discussing these strategies for maintaining housing. Queer youth who had a history of sex work were able to describe that as a distinct experience from sexual exchange. Sex work was much more likely to be framed as liberating ("magical") experience. Conversely, descriptions of sexual exchange were framed as coercive or forced. Scholars should strive for this same complexity in their own writing, avoiding the desire to either equate sexual exchange and sex work as inter-

changeable [44] or wholly exploitative [45]. Among those who discussed coercive sexual exchange, these stories differed from the common narrative of queer young people being exploited by much older adults. Instead, the majority of young people we interviewed experienced sexual coercion and assault at the hands of their similarly aged peers. More research and policy development should be devoted to this area.

While sexual exchange has received considerable attention when exploring how young, homeless queer people maintain or secure accommodation, this method was not the primary tactic employed by most of those we interviewed. Instead, queer young people were more likely to engage in exchanging chores, particularly care work, and rent for couchsurfing. The prevalence of these forms of exchange suggests that more needs to be done to proactively address the potential for labour and financial exploitation, including expanding renters' rights training. Homeless, queer youth are often ignored when it comes to discussion of labour and financial exploitation, with a focus on their sexual vulnerability. However, these more common forms of exchange also deserve attention, as recent research indicates that labour and financial exploitation are quite common among homeless youth [46–48].

5. Limitations

Some limitations remain beyond those outlined in the eligibility section; notably, this study is a small qualitative study that was exploratory in nature. The findings, particularly the reporting on the proportion of young queer people who are couchsurfing, have low external validity or generalisability to larger populations. Such generalisability is not the intended purpose of qualitative research. Instead, strengthening internal validity, or the explanatory value between related factors is the goal. The internal validity is quite strong in this paper and it can serve as a strong premise for further research. Second, the study was conducted in Queensland, Australia, a jurisdiction with reasonably strong government social programs, including a strong welfare system and socialised healthcare. Both systems were crucial in the lives of interviewees, and they were often extremely frustrated by lack of access to such systems. The findings may not be applicable to jurisdictions, such as the United States, where such programming does not exist. Finally, we have been very deliberate with our use of LGBTQ+ throughout; our study did not include any young people who identified as intersex ("I"). To date, very little research has focused specifically on the experiences of intersex young people; future research on queer homelessness should include their voices and perspectives prominently.

6. Conclusions

Amongst our interviewees, a large proportion identified as queer. Young queer people began couchsurfing following a complex array of factors related to their mental health, family abuse, rejection over their identity, and the limited availability of other appropriate housing options. In this environment, young queer people often choose to couchsurf. Couchsurfing young queer people were able to connect with their community, work on their mental health, continue working, and save money. However, couchsurfing also put young people at risk of both continued or new exploitation, additional mental health stressors, and made them a lower priority for receiving services as they were not "completely homeless". Far from being a low priority, young queer people who are couchsurfing should be supported and prioritised for housing and services.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Griffith University (GU Ref No: 2019/316; approved on 30-May-2019.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study, including those under age 18. A waiver to seek consent directly from the young person (and not their legal guardian) was granted by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee.

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