


## Article

# Radical Healing in Precarity: LGBTQ+ Young People's Approaches to Life Challenges and Aspirations through Pet Caregiving in the Context of Homelessness

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**Abstract:** Homelessness remains an enduring challenge for people from all backgrounds, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ+) young people disproportionately experience housing instability. Navigating structural oppressions tied to both their identities as well as economic inequalities can shape multiple mental health stressors for LGBTQ+ young adults. Despite these struggles, LGBTQ+ young people continue to persevere and hope, and their aspirations often prioritize processes of recovery. Healing pathways may involve forging bonds with pets or companion animals, which can be precarious in the context of homelessness. Through a radical healing framework, we qualitatively uplift the perspectives of 17 LGBTQ+ young adults (18–24) to illustrate how they may develop their wellbeing through pet caregiving and aspiration building while homeless. Participants highlighted the structural constraints of homelessness creating barriers to aspirations such as pet caregiving, but also how pets promoted their emotional wellbeing and motivation to hold onto their dreams. Findings point to avenues of service and intervention development that center LGBTQ+ young people's hopes and dreams in homelessness beyond a sole focus on basic needs.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+ young adults; homelessness; pets; radical healing



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Rates of homelessness among young people aged 18–25 in the United States are concerningly high, with approximately 1 in 10 experiencing housing instability annually [1]. The period of young adulthood is also a key developmental time when young people are establishing their sexual and/or gender identities, particularly across the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ+) spectrum [2–4]. Young people's vulnerability to homelessness and processes of developing an LGBTQ+ identity can coincide in potentially harmful ways, as LGBTQ+ youth are twice as likely to become homeless compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth [5]. Stemming from these stressors, LGBTQ+ young people experiencing homelessness (YPEH) often report significantly more mental health challenges tied to family conflict, victimization, social prejudice and discrimination, and lack of resources in relation to non-LGBTQ+ peers [6].

In understanding the inequalities that LGBTQ+ young adults can face in homelessness, it is equally important to recognize the multifaceted nature of their lives beyond a singular focus on adverse outcomes. An overemphasis on negative experiences of marginalized groups can overshadow a fuller, more nuanced portrait of LGBTQ+ young people's lives to also embody happiness, joy, and aspirations. Indeed, the reality of LGBTQ+ youth is both vibrant and dynamic to also include how they may actively resist oppressive forces such as capitalism and heteronormativity, especially within homelessness [7]. One way marginalized young people may strive to resist and counteract structural oppression is by maintaining their hopes for the future and supportive relationships with companion animals. Companion animal relationships are widespread among homeless youth [8], and there is emerging evidence of the positive power they can have in supporting mental health among LGBTQ+ YPEH [9]. Companion animal relationship support may also help connect

marginalized youth with services and resources through therapeutic interventions, which can further promote young people's future aspirations [10].

Despite growing evidence of the importance of elevating representations of LGBTQ+ young people's lives to be dynamic and rich beyond risk and even resilience, there remain gaps in understanding of the complex ways youth in homelessness develop their whole selves [7,11]. To contribute to nuanced, diverse, and brighter portraits of LGBTQ+ young people navigating homelessness, we present the qualitative narratives of 17 LGBTQ+ young adults and their pathways toward radical healing in the context of homelessness. For young people in this study, radical healing—which seeks to promote wellness by caring for the individual and fostering justice on a personal, social, and relational level—includes focusing on their future through aspirations while also developing approaches to pet caregiving that supported their wellbeing in the face of structural constraints and barriers. This study provides empirical evidence for the vibrancy of LGBTQ+ young people's lives in homelessness that challenges dominant pathologizing frameworks of their experiences and outcomes. Theoretically, we also extend applications of radical healing to be inclusive of companion animals as sources of emotional support and also affirm youths' multifaceted experiences of dreams and aspirations.

## 1. Background

### 1.1. LGBTQ+ Young People's Complex Lives

Young people are expressing growing gender and sexual diversity, with approximately 11% of young adults 18–30 identifying as LGBTQ+ [12]. A large body of research demonstrates that LGBTQ+ young adults face elevated rates of life challenges and inequalities, which stem from their exposure to prejudice and discrimination surrounding their gender and sexual identities [13]. In particular, young people with marginalized gender and sexual identities report significantly higher mental health challenges, such as depression and suicidality, compared to their heterosexual and/or gender-conforming counterparts [14,15]. These mental health disparities can also shape broader inequalities, where LGBTQ+ young adults also face disproportionately high rates of victimization in schools, including bullying and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric [16]. While these research findings on LGBTQ+ young people's life challenges are important in understanding disparities across youth outcomes, they do not illustrate the full complexity of young adults' lives to also address how young people experience joy, happiness, and community.

LGBTQ+ young people certainly face an ample amount of vulnerability when developing their identities in societal contexts that are not fully accepting, yet their stories also encompass everyday lived realities as well as depictions of growth and happiness. The Beyond Bullying Project was one of the first undertakings to paint a more holistic portrait of LGBTQ+ young people's narratives, showing how youths' gender and sexual identities are not inexorably tied to risk and danger. Rather, LGBTQ+ identity may be a source of pleasure, shared common ground, and even community-building in school cultures and spaces [17]. Work extending upon this push for framing LGBTQ+ young lives "beyond bullying" has also specifically highlighted how transgender and gender-expansive youth may derive pleasure and enjoyment from their gender identities and expressions that contradict dominant norms [18]. LGBTQ+ young people are also adept at building inclusive and supportive communities, especially among their peers, that can empower them to challenge and resist anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments they encounter [7,19]. Scholars have widely referred to processes of LGBTQ+ youth's positive outcomes as developing resilience, but this framing may also be limiting in acknowledging the mundane, bright, and powerful mosaics comprising LGBTQ+ young people's lived realities [7].

### 1.2. LGBTQ+ Young People Navigating Marginalizing Contexts

Processes of marginalization can have significant influences on LGBTQ+ young people's lives, and these processes vary widely across social contexts. LGBTQ+ youth and young adults often have to navigate societal prejudice and discrimination at multiple levels

of social life, including the interpersonal and the structural. The societal subordination of LGBTQ+ identities can shape experiences of minority stress for LGBTQ+ young people if they encounter anti-LGBTQ+ prejudicial sentiment in their everyday interactions [19,20]. Further, macro-level oppression in the form of structural stigma, including anti-LGBTQ+ policies and laws, can exacerbate mental health distress among LGBTQ+ young adults [21]. When navigating marginalizing contexts, LGBTQ+ young adults often struggle to establish social support and may encounter more harm to their psychological wellbeing if they perceive social environments to be unaccepting [22].

Major social institutions, including educational environments and families, can be widely variable in how LGBTQ+ young people establish support and acceptance. School climates can be particularly marginalizing for LGBTQ+ youth when they are perceived as being anti-LGBTQ+ and lack protections for queer students against prejudice and discrimination [16]. Importantly, gay-straight alliances in schools can promote mental health benefits, such as reducing depression and fostering academic success for LGBTQ+ students [23]. Family dynamics can operate similarly for LGBTQ+ young people, whereby family acceptance significantly shapes more positive mental health outcomes [24]. Conflict in families around LGBTQ+ young people's expansive gender and sexual identities is also widespread, with many youth reporting complex family processes of acceptance and rejection that can shape adverse mental health outcomes as well as wellbeing harms if a youth is kicked out of their home by a parent or caregiver [25,26].

Experiences of housing instability or homelessness are incredibly challenging for young people as they face constant uncertainty in meeting their basic needs and are vulnerable to victimization. LGBTQ+ young people are at significant risk of homelessness due to their marginalized social status, and their experiences while homeless are often characterized by significant stressors as well as discrimination [1]. Anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies and structural stigma oppressing LGBTQ+ identities intersect in research showing how LGBTQ+ YPEH are policed by state agents in powerful ways that constrain youths' expressions of gender and sexuality [27]. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ young people may view services as inaccessible to them if they perceive prejudicial sentiment and/or experience discrimination, or they may resign themselves to using services for basic needs at the risk of victimization [28]. Indeed, LGBTQ+ youth may struggle to form supportive relationships in homelessness, and companion animals may be a primary source of support and a way to offset loneliness even when pet ownership may constrain service usage if pets are not allowed entry [9,29].

### *1.3. Dreams and Aspirations among Young People*

Young people from marginalized backgrounds and those navigating marginalizing social contexts face significant challenges in their lives, but this does not mean that they are solely defined by their adverse experiences. Understandings of how young people conceptualize their future lives through beliefs and aspirations are considered a formative aspect of positive youth development through their focus on skills around making informed choices and working toward goals [30]. Research widely supports the importance of centering young people's diverse backgrounds, identities, and experiences as impacting and even constraining their development of dreams and pursuit of aspirations [31]. Young, or emerging, adulthood can also be a critical period of future belief formation in the transition from youth dependence [2]; however, broader social inequalities across gender, sexuality, race, and social class are powerful in creating barriers to young people's hopes and dreams [32].

Young people navigating marginalization can face significant challenges in not only developing future aspirations but striving to achieve those dreams and goals. Structural constraints, such as poverty, homelessness, and anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies, can all combine to shape heightened marginalization of young people from stigmatized social groups. Idealized, dominant notions of "success" and "happiness" often relate to homonormative objectives for LGBTQ+ people, such as framing getting married as a capstone achievement,

as well as capitalist goals such as pursuing education and getting a good job to achieve one's dreams [33]. Youth of color in homelessness may also be socialized to aspire to racialized and classed stereotypical roles, such as service providers encouraging black youth to work low-wage jobs and motivating white youth to pursue upward economic mobility [34]. These dominant ideals may then be internalized by marginalized youth, such as LGBTQ+ YPEH, where "failure" is conceptualized as a personal or family-based shortcoming, rather than structural failures driven by intergenerational poverty. Furthermore, homeless services are specifically focused on individual rehabilitation, such as promoting getting a GED or a low-wage, part-time job, when these so-called "successes" are not promotive of people's economic self-sufficiency in a capitalist structure. Indeed, many LGBTQ+ desire these same homonormative, capitalist ideals in their own lives to be "happy": getting a degree, becoming financially independent, and having children [35]. It is therefore necessary to paint a more comprehensive portrait of marginalized young people's dream-making, aspirations, and future planning to better recognize the structural constraints shaping their access to opportunities, resources, and experiences.

Structures of homelessness may also not be supportive of holistic wellbeing among young adults by largely, if not solely, focusing on meeting basic needs, potentially at the expense of emotional and psychological wellness through aspirations that can come from diverse sources, such as companion animals. Pets are widely shown to have positive impacts on people's complex mental health, including the development of future goals and having a positive outlook on life [36,37]. Further, LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those experiencing homelessness, may develop more expansive meanings of both "family" and "home" that focus on symbolic relationships rather than solely biological ties and physical structures, including bonds with cherished pets [38,39]. As young LGBTQ+ people in homelessness navigate their identities (both in terms of being LGBTQ+ and experiencing homelessness), pet relationships may be an important source of social support that mitigates experiences of everyday structural disadvantage, promoting their mental wellbeing. Pets, from this framework, can be viewed as having a *healing* role in the lives of LGBTQ+ young people in homelessness.

#### 1.4. Radical Healing Framework

LGBTQ+ adults are more likely to seek out and receive mental health treatment than their cisgender heterosexual peers [40], but may still be underutilizing mental and other health services due to past experiences of discrimination and/or stigma, as well as the fear of potentially experiencing it [41]. LGBTQ+ people have reported ample experiences of discrimination within psychological and psychiatric medical settings, reducing their trust in mental health services [42]. Negative encounters with clinicians and other service professionals often stem from historical pathologization of marginalized social groups and the simultaneous tension with neoliberal imperatives idealizing individual responsibility while dismissing structural inequalities. Being pathologized as a "health risk" just for being LGBTQ+ (or that an identity such as being gay or transgender is in and of itself a mental health issue) heightens perceptions of stigmatization and creates a barrier to effective communication within institutional entities [43–45]. LGBTQ+ identities, as well as homelessness itself, are simultaneously labeled as health risks, yet people who are LGBTQ+ and/or homeless are, paradoxically, victim-blamed and viewed as personally responsible for their social and health outcomes [46]. These ideological tensions shape an oversimplification of the challenges surrounding mental health and homelessness, particularly the tendency to ignore the structural processes that lead to widespread social issues such as mental health and homelessness [46,47].

The model of radical healing provides a social justice perspective in advocating for and supporting social groups who experience marginalization. Primarily, the radical healing perspective recognizes that "the trauma of oppression caused by poverty, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation is an important political act that requires reconciliation and testimony. It moves from ascribing individual blame to identifying

systemic oppression as holding those systems responsible” [48] (p. 23). This process is promoted by examining three levels of wellness for those who experience marginalization: individual, community, and social-level wellness [49]. At the individual level, wellness is conceptualized as promoting personal transformation through cultivating agency, critical consciousness, hope and optimism, resistance to social toxins, and a radical imagination toward new possibilities. For many individuals who experience marginalization, the trauma from racism, sexism, heterosexism, and poverty can impose internalized feelings of blame and hopelessness that create constraints to healing and action [49]. By centering and promoting wellness through caring for the individual, the radical healing model fosters broader social justice on a personal level, whereby individual healing is directly linked to community and social healing.

At the community or relational level, wellness is conceptualized as promoting solidarity and healthy relationships, empowerment, collective action toward social change, and establishing a thriving community. Mosley et al. explored how multiplying oppressions at the community level diminished physical and emotional safety for Black queer people, and how accepting, supportive relationships are critical to healing [50]. Creating spaces for refuge can provide a secure base for marginalized communities to heal and confront trauma [51]. When, however, family-of-origin relationships are no longer a secure base or physically and emotionally safe, then individuals may seek alternative relationships, or families of choice [52]. In addition to these human attachments and relationships by choice, new forms of attachment have been observed in human-pet relationships [53]. Radical healing acknowledges social-level wellness as a freedom from oppression to create new possibilities, collective action, and finding a sense of peace [54]. Understanding how society has a collective impact on health and wellbeing and as such requires collective healing to fully address public health solutions that are grounded in justice, equity, and resilience [55]. The integration of all three levels enables a pivot toward the goal of personal and social healing.

Supporting radical healing for LGBTQ+ young adults is a movement away from ascribing individual blame and toward supporting resistance to social toxins that perpetuate systemic oppression [49]. Radical healing is a call to action toward change that addresses tangible and intangible needs such that those without a home need adequate housing and those without social or emotional support need that support. One way LGBTQ+ young adults and people in homelessness have sought to enact and imagine healthier personal-, community-, and social-level transformative relationships is through animal companionship. People in homelessness specifically draw critical support from companion animals in terms of a sense of responsibility and purpose, as well as positive emotional life impacts [56]. LGBTQ+ young adults may also derive personal strength and comfort from their companion animals in managing prejudice, discrimination, and victimization [57,58]. Further examination of how young people at the intersection of being LGBTQ+ and homeless pursue radical healing processes is warranted to better understand the lived experiences of people who are multiply marginalized.

Our unique contribution to the radical healing framework is the application to LGBTQ+ emerging adults’ experiences navigating the marginalizing context of homelessness; radical healing approaches, while clearly applicable to LGBTQ+ young people, have more often been applied in the context of racial discrimination and inequalities, including structural racism and health within racially minoritized communities [48]. There is an opportunity to understand how this framework specifically applies to LGBTQ+ young people [50], and how pets specifically may be sources of support to promote wellbeing.

## 2. Methods

The study was conducted from 2018 through 2019 in Oklahoma. Inclusion criteria required participants to be between 18 and 25 and identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or another expansive gender and/or sexual identity (including genderqueer, asexual, and pansexual). We recruited young people experiencing homelessness through



local service agencies (e.g., homeless shelters and drop-in centers) in two major metropolitan areas by posting flyers, volunteering at drop-in centers, and collaborating with service providers. To participate, young people had to fall into an expansive definition of homelessness, including currently residing in a shelter, on the street, or independently in unstable housing (i.e., “couch surfing”) because they had run away, had been pushed out, or had drifted out of their family of origin [59]. The study was advertised as “‘Building Bridges on Four Paws,’ which explores LGBTQ+ young adults’ experiences of homelessness, mental health, and pets”. To promote study transparency, the USD 20 was also advertised as a potential compensation for eligible participation. The university institutional review board assessed and approved the project’s full protocol by ensuring it met the high ethical standards promoted by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program). All study personnel completed CITI training prior to data collection. Young people did not have to currently own a pet to be eligible. Additionally, we used snowball sampling by handing out optional referral cards with the study contact information to all participants.

We consulted with an informal community advisory board (CAB) of service providers to homeless young people in Oklahoma to enhance the study’s cultural competence (i.e., preparing the recruitment materials and interview guide; interpreting the data) [60]. For example, the CAB encouraged the use of the term “pet” in place of “companion animal” in the study materials to enhance understanding and minimize youth’s misinterpretations of the study benefits, such as erroneously believing they would receive a therapy animal for participating. Although it was not feasible to garner feedback on data analysis from the young adults interviewed for this study (i.e., no reliable contact information, variable service usage), the CAB reviewed preliminary findings and suggested revisions to promote person-centered language and young people’s lives beyond homelessness, such as family backgrounds and future plans. The research team shared a comprehensive study report with CAB members and agency staff to mobilize findings into substantive social change [61].

### 3. Procedure

The first author conducted all the interviews in English. Study participants completed one tape-recorded, in-depth, face-to-face interview lasting approximately one hour and a short demographic questionnaire. Participants were interviewed in private locations, such as agency meeting rooms. Study procedures were explained to participants and verbal informed consent was obtained prior to the interview. Young adults were informed that participation was voluntary, and that they could choose how much to share, skip questions they did not want to answer or found inapplicable, and end the interview at any time. Participants received USD 20 in exchange for their time. All respondents were asked the same series of 15 open-ended questions surrounding their LGBTQ+ identity, mental health experiences, and their relationships with pets. Examples of primary interview questions include: What role have pets played in your present life? How do/would you take care of your pet? How has a pet impacted your mental health? We utilized topical open-ended questions to encourage participants to reflectively consider their responses in-depth and help us reach our goal of thematic saturation in understanding the salience of pets in young people’s lives [62]. Table 1 presents participant demographics.

A constructivist realism approach guided the development of this study, including recruitment materials, interview questions, and subsequent coding strategies, to emphasize the “multilayered” processes of LGBTQ+ young people’s worlds as “events that unfold and recur in the flow of time and are only meaningful when understood in context” [63]. This approach aligns with a radical healing framework because it moves away from delineating LGBTQ+ young people’s experiences in a piecemeal way that only serves to obfuscate the broader social context that they are navigating. Constructivist realism also ensures “inclusion-centered interpretations” surrounding LGBTQ+ young people’s distinctive understandings of their multiple identities and experiences with homelessness and pets [64]. Participants chose their own pseudonyms to ensure respondent confidentiality.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

| Sociodemographic Variables ( <i>n</i> = 17) | Sample Size/Percentage<br><i>n</i> (%) |
|---|--|
| <i>Age</i> (range = 18–24; mean = 21)       |  |
| <i>Sexual identity</i>                      |  |
| Lesbian                                     | 2 (12)                                 |
| Gay   | 1 (6)                                  |
| Bisexual                                    | 10 (59)                                |
| Pansexual                                   | 4 (24)                                 |
| <i>Gender identity</i>                      |  |
| Cisgender women                             | 4 (24)                                 |
| Cisgender men                               | 6 (35)                                 |
| Transgender woman                           | 2 (12)                                 |
| Transgender man                             | 1 (6)                                  |
| Non-binary                                  | 3 (18)                                 |
| Two-Spirit                                  | 1 (6)                                  |
| <i>Race/ethnicity</i>                       |  |
| Bi or Multiracial                           | 8 (47)                                 |
| White                                       | 5 (29)                                 |
| African American or Black                   | 2 (12)                                 |
| Native American or American Indian          | 1 (6)                                  |
| Latino/a or Hispanic                        | 1 (6)                                  |

The first, second, and third authors collaborated to code and analyze the data using MAXQDA 2022, with validating feedback from the fourth author, including iterative memoring of coding processes and discussions of theme construction to enhance the study's rigor and trustworthiness [65]. As a gender-conforming, white woman academic whose sexual identity was unknown to participants, the interviewer and primary coder reflected on how her positions of privilege influenced the interviewing dynamics and data interpretations working with LGBTQ+ young people with histories of homelessness. For example, the first author decentered her own biases and worldview during interviews and data analysis to more effectively act as a conduit for elevating marginalized youths' voices [66]. The second author, being a cisgender Middle Eastern woman, recognized the potential bias of her positionality as an ethnic minority while observing the various dynamics between LGBTQ+ youth and their experiences with homelessness, considering several participants also identified as racial and/or ethnic minorities. By comparing and discussing data observations with the other authors, she was able to objectively validate her analysis. The third author was unknown to participants, but as a cisgender white woman who has not experienced homelessness, she recognizes the expertise of LGBTQ+ youth regarding their own experiences, and strove to center their personal narratives over imposing her own viewpoints on homelessness. The fourth author, a cisgender white male, reflected on the intersection between academic and professional experiences associated with being both a sociology graduate student and mental health counselor. The third author reviewed and provided feedback to MAXQDA data categories and added to inter-rater reliability by spot-checking coding.

We adopted a phenomenological approach to capture participants' lived experiences, and examined emergent themes from participants' narratives [67]. First, we used initial coding to identify broad themes and categories that corresponded with concepts of interest, such as conceptions of gender and sexual identities and interpretations of stress and trauma [68]. Next, we employed focused coding to center in on the participants' lived realities from their own perspectives to determine the most salient experiences among participants and how concepts of interest were interrelated. For example, the initial codes of "pets as purpose" and "pets as coping strategy" combined together to encapsulate the more focused code surrounding participants' perceptions of "pets as life supports". The final themes emerged inductively from the data. The combination of initial and focused coding supports a constructivist perspective, which underscores the participants' understandings

of their lived realities and the meanings they attach to their experiences [68]. In cases of coding conflicts, we conferred to discuss, and then conducted collaborative analyses until consensus, such as through code modification or disconfirming evidence identification. We established qualitative inter-rater reliability through a 95% level of coding agreement, which is much higher than the 70% or greater score recommended for thematic qualitative analyses [69].

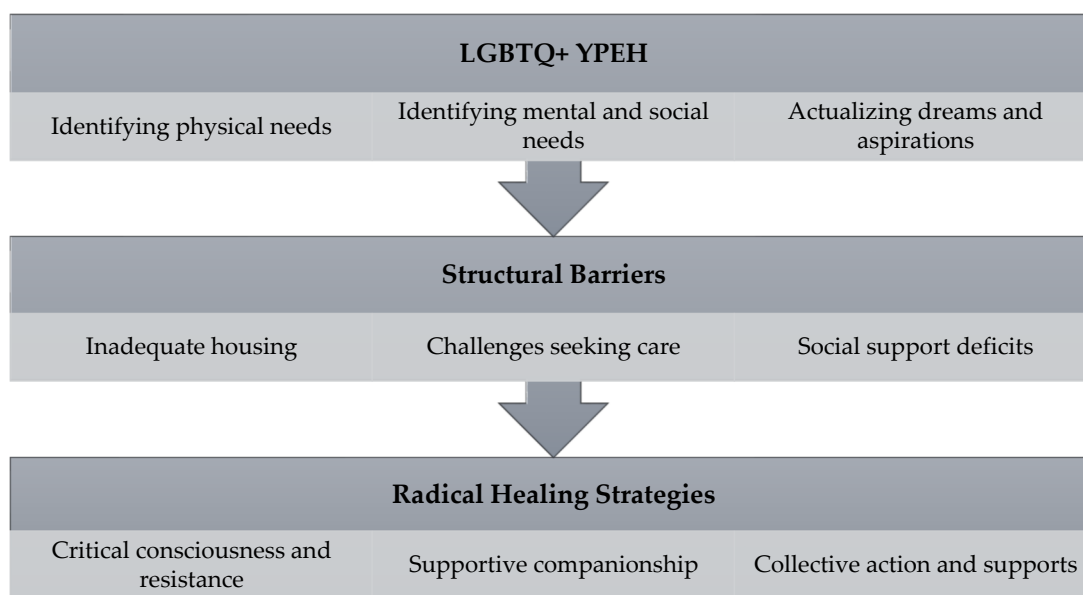
#### 4. Findings

Participant narratives illuminated support for the radical healing framework by emphasizing the relationships between LGBTQ+ young people experiencing homelessness (YPEH) and their animal companions. Drawing from a radical healing model, results suggest that pet companions can be an important dimension of social support among LGBTQ YPEH addressing systemic inequalities, fostering resistance and resilience in the face of extreme disadvantage. Figure 1 illustrates the process of radical healing described by participants. First and foremost, all 17 participants described their relationships with pets, ranging from childhood to their present lives, as supportive in their lives, especially in regard to mental and emotional wellbeing, highlighting individual and relational benefits of pet companions. Secondly, participants described constraints of utilizing formal services as a result of pet ownership, which included limited access to resources, gaps in knowledge or awareness of services, and a lack of trust in service providers and institutions. Finally, pet relationships often invoked feelings of aspirations and hope as pets were included in young people's dreams for the future, such as having a place of their own. Dreaming of the future included a desire to serve as sources of support for future generations of LGBTQ+ youth that may experience homelessness as a result of the same multifaceted pathways endured by participants. Table 2 provides a summary of the qualitative findings.

**Table 2.** Qualitative findings summary.

| Themes                               | Selected Qualitative Quotes  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Pathways to Healing                  | "I always have something to do, even if it's just playing, or just when they nuzzle up to you, or when they're trying to speak to you. Sitting there, squeaking, or barking. You get a distraction from the real world, sometimes. Even though the animal is real, but you still get a distraction, because you forget about all your problems in that little time." (Laura, Two-Spirit African American lesbian)  |
|                                      | "Cute animals like puppies and kittens produce the same chemicals in the human brain that being around a baby does. But more emotionally, I think it's just that they're soft and fuzzy and the feeling that there's somebody there who's not about to make it worse, who's not going to say anything to set you off, other than 'meow.'" (Jared, cisgender white bisexual man)  |
| Roadblocks to Recovery               | "Because they're there to listen, they're not there to care. They're just being paid to sit there and listen to your bullshit. They may act like they care, they may put on a mask like they care. But in reality they couldn't care less." (Samantha, transgender Cherokee bisexual woman)  |
|                                      | "We've literally foregone beds in shelters so that we could stay with our pets. There's no shelters in the city that we can stay in, because we have our cats. Even though Eleanor's an emotional support animal and I have her ID and the paperwork that I need for her, it still isn't enough, because technically emotional support animals are not seen as needed as much as service animals are." (Devin, transgender queer pansexual person of Cherokee, Creek, and African American descent)                            |
|                                      | "They actually help you out a lot. They can help you out with more than just mental health services. They can also help you out when it comes to trying to find something else to get into, like schooling or something. And say you needed a ride back or something, they can help you out with a bus token or two." (Lilly, gender-fluid white pansexual woman)  |
| Aspirations and Dreams of Resistance | "Knowing that there's a small or not so small creature that depends on me at least having the spirit to be able to get up and take care of them when I can't take care of myself, it forces me to at least make sure I'm okay enough to be there for them for one more day." (Avery, non-binary white and African American pansexual person)   |
|                                      | "I want to help kids just like me who are on the streets. I know it's against the rules here, but if they are really having a bad time and people are picking on them on the streets, I'll let them stay a couple nights until we can find a solution. Even if I have to get them an apartment, I don't care. If they're getting that abused out there, I will do whatever it takes, because that's not fair. I know how that feels to be neglected and not fit in the world." (Natalie, trans-fluid Hispanic bisexual person) |





**Figure 1.** Radical healing processes.

#### 4.1. Pathways to Healing

For many of the YPEH in our study, pets and companion animals were framed as positive aspects of their lives that benefited their mental and emotional health, especially during times of distress. As one major healing strategy, many participants shared how, on an individual level, interacting with pets, especially dogs and cats, helped them shift their focus from being solely internal and harmful, such as fearful thoughts, to an external focus that could be more productive. By having a positive distraction in the form of an adorable animal, LGBTQ+ YPEH recognized the possibility of pets promoting their wellbeing through effective coping mechanisms. Laura, for example, identifies as a Two-Spirit African American lesbian and explained how her mundane interactions with animals allowed her a sense of mental stability and clarity that she was not able to achieve elsewhere:

I always have something to do, even if it's just playing, or just when they nuzzle up to you, or when they're trying to speak to you. Sitting there, squeaking, or barking. You get a distraction from the real world, sometimes. Even though the animal is real, but you still get a distraction, because you forget about all your problems in that little time.

In further describing her experience with animals providing her with calmness and peace, Laura explained how riding horses after she ran away from home helped her manage stress: "Riding my horse made me feel free . . . it opened my mind, and felt like it was escaping". These types of "distractions" cited by participants, while seemingly minor and every day, can indeed represent critical processes for young people to prioritize their own healing even when they lack basic resources such as stable housing.

Experiencing homelessness itself can be an incredibly isolating experience, particularly for young people who are still developing their sense of self in a formative period of development. Young adults in homelessness are often faced with struggles in establishing supportive and trustworthy social relationships, and this process can be even more challenging for LGBTQ+ YPEH who may face rejection through prejudice and discrimination. One participant, Samantha, a transgender Cherokee bisexual woman, explained how forming meaningful connections with animals can be key in helping people manage mental health challenges by giving them a "purpose":

People with isolation fears, with depression. They can always use something, someone. Not even someone... as long as they feel a connection, even if it's an

animal, they feel a connection. They feel like there's something worth living for. They give you a purpose.

Echoing Samantha, Greg, a cisgender white gay man, stressed the importance of animals' presence in a person's life by always being there for support, even when life stressors feel overwhelming: "Pets have always made things a little easier, I think. Just something better to come home to. You have a little friend to come home to". For YPEH, pets may symbolize a feeling of being "home" even when lacking a stable physical residence, and this idea of "home" can help young people cope with stress and the instability and uncertainty of living in homelessness.

Young adult participants also widely recognized that pets and interacting with companion animals can directly promote their mental health through physical touch and emotional bonding. Many young people emphasized the empirical evidence supporting the connection between people and positive mental health, such as Jared, a cisgender white bisexual man. He stated this correlation is scientifically proven:

Cute animals like puppies and kittens produce the same chemicals in the human brain that being around a baby does. But more emotionally, I think it's just that they're soft and fuzzy and the feeling that there's somebody there who's not about to make it worse, who's not going to say anything to set you off, other than 'meow'.

When asked what it is about animals that helps him feel better emotionally, Jared simply replied, "Having a cat who is soft and fluffy, it only weighs eight pounds, I don't know why it calms me down, it just does". Luke, a cisgender pansexual man who identifies as half white and half Native American, also offered support for this clearly evident, yet ephemeral and abstract, awareness of how companion animals can relieve stress and uplift one's spirits: "When you're petting your dog, your cat, or whatever it is that you have, it's soothing because you know that you've got an animal laying in your lap that loves you unconditionally, and you love them. Your petting them is just the bond". Participants' descriptions of pet relationships and how they can promote personal wellbeing points to pets' vital role in radical healing for LGBTQ+ YPEH, even when this dynamic is not wholly understood, it is widely accepted as fact.

Many young people also acknowledged the importance of pets in people's lives specifically while navigating the structural inequality of homelessness. For Devin, who identifies as a transgender queer pansexual person of Cherokee, Creek, and African American descent, having pets while homeless often served a seemingly utilitarian purpose of helping people manage mental health struggles: "Homeless people tend to not have pets just because they want pets. A lot of times they'll have pets because pets really help with mental illness or addiction by always giving you that constant of 'I've got to feed my cat' or 'I've got to take care of my dog.'" Other youth, such as Samantha, desired what would be clinically termed an "emotional support animal" (ESA) as she struggles with mental health challenges, but "medicines don't really do much for me": "That's why I'm gonna try and get a cat. It's gonna help with a lot of things. Cats express their emotions more specifically . . . like I can have a conversation with the cat, and the cat's gonna understand and react accordingly". While this need for pets to help support mental health may not always be a conscious driver for having pets while homeless, additional youth supported this sentiment, such as Kayla, a cisgender bisexual woman who is both Native American and Hispanic. She likens a pet to "a gift from God":

It's someone you can sit down with and really understand. You know, be able to feel comfortable, because you know your dog can't talk back to you. The dog could just, you know, be there for you when you really need it to be supportive. Or you know, just be there to protect you when you're scared, and alone.

From helping to maintain a steady, stable schedule of responsibilities to providing a sense of comfort and security, pets clearly represented brightness and light in young people's lives when they may have few reliable sources of support while homeless. As

Derek, a cisgender bisexual Cherokee man, stated, pets could often be more trustworthy in providing consistent support when compared to people: “They actually are there for you, they actually sit and listen”. In these ways, companion animals can fulfill a critical, irreplaceable role in LGBTQ+ young people’s lives when they lack basic resources such as stable housing.

LGBTQ+ YPEH also widely underscored the positive aspects of having pets in their lives, but this was not always a simple and straightforward understanding. Several participants shared insights that recognized the potential challenges and more negative components of having a companion animal, especially while homeless. Pet ownership came with a host of challenges for young people, specifically in securing stable housing that would be accommodating to their companion animals. In one poignant example, Sarah, a cisgender bisexual white woman, explained how she had to leave her beloved dog behind after leaving an abusive relationship and entering into housing instability:

A couple of years ago I had this dog. He was half Husky, half pit bull. And he was pure white with light blue eyes. He was my favorite little thing, but I was in an abusive relationship back then and I’m pregnant. So my ex got arrested for battery by strangulation, and I wasn’t able to take my dog with me when I had to leave, because his dad owned the house that we were staying in. So I had to leave, ‘cause they were harassing me after he got arrested. I had to leave my dog there. It was just kinda hard ‘cause I didn’t know what was going to happen to him.

Similarly, Luke emphasized the “trauma” of a pet’s death: “When they pass away it tears you up because you knew them for so long”. Caring for pets is also expensive, as many LGBTQ+ YPEH noted, especially when they were struggling to secure their own basic needs, such as in Jared’s case: “I don’t have a lot of money, I don’t have a way to keep them healthy or fed or to buy the litter they need. That’s part of the reason why I just didn’t go out and get a cat, because I don’t have the constant funds to keep one okay”. Structural constraints described here can be significant barriers to young people not only having pets if they desire but also supporting their ability to keep companion animals in their lives. Therefore, youths’ journeys on pathways to recovery recognize both the positive potential of pets and the costly limitations.

#### *4.2. Roadblocks to Recovery*

In stark contrast to the widespread agreement among participants that pets could benefit their wellbeing in numerous ways, formal services were largely critiqued among LGBTQ+ YPEH with few exceptions. Several participants described their interactions with support organizations as disappointing in their inability to authentically connect with youths’ experiences. Kelly, a cisgender African American lesbian woman, succinctly summarized the inadequacy of service providers as being attributed to “they don’t know your struggle”. Specifically, Richard, a cisgender bisexual man who identifies as both white and Cherokee, explained that he avoided utilizing any mental health resources due to a lack of trust, even after his dog went to live with his dad, and he previously coped by going to “play fetch with my dog and forget about my problems”: “I don’t agree with them [providers] trying to act like they know where I’m coming from, when they haven’t been through half the stuff I’ve been through in my life”. These examples shared by youth indicate the serious roadblock youth face in their mental health recovery processes in the form of a lack of relatability and even empathy perceived by service providers.

Stemming from a lack of trust and perceptions of support from service agencies, many youths also expressed negative views of organizations not caring about their wellbeing but rather feeling commodified and stigmatized in the process of service usage. Expanding on her desire to secure an ESA cat to live with and help “calm me down when my mental breakdown happens,” Samantha reflected on her experiences with formal counseling and therapy that “doesn’t work much for me” due to her critical view of uncaring staff and the transactional nature of therapy: “Because they’re there to listen, they’re not there to

care. They're just being paid to sit there and listen to your bullshit. They may act like they care, they may put on a mask like they care. But in reality they couldn't care less". Derek also concurred that his experiences with mental health providers made him mistrustful of the care process because the workers are "just there for the money, they didn't care". Several young people also shared that perceptions of staff shifted from apathetic to hurtful when they experienced stigmatizing treatment from providers, such as Laura, who felt very uncomfortable by the personally invasive questions a counselor asked her: "I didn't like it. I felt like they were trying to get inside my head. I'm like, 'You're making me feel like a psycho patient, stop it.'" In a more severely harmful example, Caleb, a cisgender bisexual man with both white and Native heritage, developed a distrust of law enforcement in general after the death of his dog: "I started feeling anti-government, in a way, because an off-duty police officer shot my dog". The overarching theme of dissatisfaction and critiques of social services, and mental health care in particular, being uncaring or harmful underscores a major structural constraint to young people's engagement with radical healing if they begin avoiding care altogether due to negative perceptions.

Some participants explained that they lacked awareness and understanding of various services available to them, which can contribute to youth feeling powerless in their life situations and perceiving barriers to healing. In discussing the challenges of finding animal-inclusive services and supports, Avery, a non-binary white and African American pansexual person, stated, "It's hard because as far as knowledge of animal-friendly places, I don't have a whole lot of information on that. To the best of my knowledge, there aren't too many that are". Pet caregiving assistance, such as a pet food pantry, were not widely known among young people. For example, Luke recalled a mobile service that handed out dog food and supplies in multiple areas around the city, but believed that it no longer existed. These young people's narratives suggest how a lack of awareness of support services may be constraining LGBTQ+ YPEH's ability to meet their holistic needs such as having a companion animal and supporting their emotional wellbeing.

Here again, it is necessary to recognize the multifaceted lens that must be applied to LGBTQ+ YPEH's lives, as a handful of participants shared narratives highlighting the positive potential of various service providers. In one striking example, Lilly, a gender-fluid white pansexual woman, shared her "ideal" mental health service was focused on "family and children services" because they support her life in numerous ways:

They actually help you out a lot. They can help you out with more than just mental health services. They can also help you out when it comes to trying to find something else to get into, like schooling or something. And say you needed a ride back or something, they can help you out with a bus token or two.

Honesty among service providers was the most valued trait cited by participants, as youth strongly desired authenticity when seeking mental health care. Missy, for example, who identifies as a cisgender half-white, half-Hispanic bisexual woman, discussed her long-time therapist of four years and how she appreciated that "he's a smart ass. He can tell me when I'm bullshitting and lying and not telling the truth about how I've been ... he's a straight shooter. I like that". Young people generally had positive views of services they benefited from, and negative views were tied to harmful experiences that made it challenging to build that trust again after it had been broken. Trusting providers and perceiving them as supportive and helpful certainly aid in LGBTQ+ YPEH's healing processes by fulfilling their various instrumental and emotional needs. Barriers created by broken trust further contributed to how many young people in homelessness may feel that services are inaccessible to them.

A major constraint faced by LGBTQ+ YPEH in accessing social support services lay in how organizations were perceived as accessible or not. All participants were aware of the lack of inclusion of companion animals in homeless services, and many had personal experiences with the challenge of utilizing certain services while having pets. For Devin and their partner, keeping their cats with them was the number one priority, and this decision often came at the cost of not utilizing services when they would otherwise qualify:

We've literally foregone beds in shelters so that we could stay with our pets. There's no shelters in the city that we can stay in, because we have our cats. Even though Eleanor's an emotional support animal and I have her ID and the paperwork that I need for her, it still isn't enough, because technically emotional support animals are not seen as needed as much as service animals are.

In Caleb's case, rehoming his dog was the best option due to challenges with his dog's compatibility in different housing situations:

When I started to become homeless and drugs were an issue, surfing couch to couch at different places, it's kind of hard bringing a large German Shepherd or any big animal into any place that has kids, because the person in charge doesn't want to take a chance.

Situations such as Devin's and Caleb's create a double bind where young people are forced to sacrifice a vital component of their wellbeing in favor of another piece. Greg found a way to potentially balance this conflict despite residing in a transitional living facility: "I don't have a pet because pets aren't allowed, obviously, but I'll occasionally see my grandma's dogs. Or my mom's. I always enjoy seeing them". Even in the face of seemingly impossible life situations, such as having to choose between their companion animal and a basic need, LGBTQ+ YPEH found innovative ways to cope and support their own wellbeing by resisting structural constraints.

#### 4.3. Aspirations and Dreams of Resistance

LGBTQ+ YPEH also tended to frame pets as a way to navigate future conflict, address past trauma, and center pets into their aspirations and dreams for the future. Participants expressed deriving a sense of protection and safety from having a pet, such as in the case of Kayla who stated:

If I ever plan on having kids, I would not let anything happen to them. If I had to run and do something, and like say a person breaks in, my child is not going to get harmed because they have pets. You know, pets have... all dogs are different, but they all have a certain way of standing their guard.

While Kayla focused on the role of protector pets can play, other young people framed pet companions as important to aid in coping after a traumatic experience. Caleb, for example, discussed how growing up he found he could open up to his dog and be vulnerable with them following a family conflict. Drawing support from animals continued into later life, as Caleb shared how pets remain his most reliable confidantes:

Someone says, "Ha, you're gay. Get out of here, you fag," I mean, God, that hurts me, but do I want to take it upon myself and beat someone up, or would I rather just wait, and go home to my animal, and be able to identify with them? Because I know I can go to them, and talk to them. It's not going to go behind my back and tell anybody else. At the end of the day, knowing that I can get things off my mind and it not be used against me later on, it's really a sense of closure.

These findings illustrate the relational benefits of pet companionship, particularly how pets can serve as a source of social support in addressing present, potential, or past negative experiences.

In addition, pets at times provided confidence or a reason for LGBTQ+ YPEH to self-advocate, and served as a reminder of their perseverance and competence. For example, Avery elaborated on how pets motivated them to keep going and not give up:

Knowing that there's a small or not so small creature that depends on me at least having the spirit to be able to get up and take care of them when I can't take care of myself, it forces me to at least make sure I'm okay enough to be there for them for one more day.



Some participants, however, expressed that they lacked coping mechanisms during experiences of mental distress; for example, when reflecting on their depression Melanie, a bisexual transgender white woman, stated, “I would hide from it, and let it absorb me when I was alone”. For others, pets motivated them to take care of themselves and focus on being there for them on a day-to-day basis.

Furthermore, LGBTQ+ YPEH directly framed pets within their aspirations for the future. Home ownership, for example, was discussed in relation to pet companions by Richard, who stated, “I’d like to have a decent-sized piece of land so I can have a lot of animals and pets”. Lilly elaborated on their goal of having a pet be a part of their future family:

I want them to be like actually part of my family. Like I cannot get rid of them. Like right now it’s because it helps me with my mood, it distracts me and they’re really fun and it’s so worth it. They’re like your friend. But I’m hoping in the future they’re more like family than a friend.

Framing pet companions’ future role as part of a family was echoed by Samantha, who saw pet companions as providing important experience or training for a future family: “I also eventually want a family of my own. If I can’t raise a baby kitten, how am I gonna take care of a baby?” Samantha even interpreted the steps she was currently making for her future family aspirations as related to her preparation around pet companionship:

I’m doing things more than just for myself. I’m preparing for my mate, I’m preparing for an animal, a family. You know, I’m not doing it just for me. If anything I’m not doing it for me at all, I’m doing it for them.

Avery also reiterated their commitment to their pet’s welfare by reflecting that they’ve “had plenty of jobs [they] hated, but [they] kept them because they made it so [they] could make sure that the pets were safe”. Pets, therefore, can both be important motivators and a critical aspect of future aspirations of LGBTQ+ YPEH, particularly as they relate to homeownership and family formation.

Finally, LGBTQ+ YPEH expressed aspirations not only in terms of supporting and maintaining pet companionships, but also in lifting up each other. Resisting narratives that LGBTQ+ YPEH are at fault for their own homelessness or putting themselves at risk, participants reflected on their desires to help each other and future generations overcome structural barriers impeding their success. Natalie, who identifies as a trans-fluid Hispanic bisexual person, remarked on their desire to be a role model and source of support for future generations stating:

I want to help kids just like me who are on the streets. I know it’s against the rules here, but if they are really having a bad time and people are picking on them on the streets, I’ll let them stay a couple nights until we can find a solution. Even if I have to get them an apartment, I don’t care. If they’re getting that abused out there, I will do whatever it takes, because that’s not fair. I know how that feels to be neglected and not fit in the world.

Helping other people in the face of adversity was typically tied to young people’s personal experiences and sense of empathy related to shared experiences. This sense of shared support is despite having limited resources themselves, as Caleb remarked:

I’m the type of person that will go out of my way and spend every last dollar I have for someone to help someone out, whether they come back or not. It’s the sense of, I like helping other people before I help myself.

Mutual support from others experiencing similar circumstances is a way LGBTQ+ YPEH can foster community healing while simultaneously experiencing systemic structural disadvantages.

Even though participants were aware of the limited resources at their disposal, helping peers was often central to their future aspirations as well. Natalie shared the following aspiration:

My career, I want to be a lawyer. I want to fight for people's rights. I feel like if someone's in my shoes I'll be the perfect lawyer for them. If the police officer does something, doesn't like them or whatever, I could just be like, "Well, you know what? I'm the same way. Why aren't you arresting me?" I feel like it's just un-right, because people have rights in this country that some police officers don't go by. It could be a peaceful protest, and that's freedom of speech. They'll arrest all of them. Even though it's peaceful, they will arrest them. That's not fair. We have rights.

Here we see how resisting existing forms of structural inequality, in this case discrimination from law enforcement, can be embedded in future aspirations, and how giving back to others experiencing similar forms of stigma and disadvantage can be a powerful motivating force in the lives of LGBTQ+ YPEH.

## 5. Discussion

Drawing from a radical healing framework, we consider how participants understood and experienced pet companions vis-à-vis individual-, relational-, and societal-level processes. Indeed, it is widely recognized that supporting people in homelessness, particularly those living with pets, requires a multilevel approach acknowledging how policies, public perceptions, and services can be improved to prioritize keeping people and their pets together [70]. On an individual level, LGBTQ+ youth derived value and purpose in caring for their pet companions. As Ginwright [49] described, "Most of us, if we're lucky, have someone or something we care about. We care for our children with precious attentive nurturing, we care for our spouse or partner with unconditional and selfless support, we care for our pets as our best friends and important members of our families . . . In our pivot toward a healing-centered society, care is perhaps one of the most important ingredients to cultivate transformative relationships" (p. 113). Study findings illuminate how LGBTQ+ youth expressed both resilience and resistance to social inequalities through care with pet companions.

On the relational level, LGBTQ+ YPEH identified pet companions as accepting, loving, and adding crucial support for mental health to their lives. LGBTQ+ youth, when experiencing emotional and/or physical distance from a family of origin and transitioned to a family of choice [52], perceived pet companionship as an important part of their need for relational connection. This sense of unconditional support of pet companions is in stark contrast to perceptions that therapists and service providers approach interactions with LGBTQ+ YPEH in a transactional, and unaffirming, way. Previous research has identified the constraints in formal care facing LGBTQ+ young adults, including a lack of research on effective mental health interventions and limited provider training [11,41]. In this sense, pet companions can be an important and novel source of social support in the lives of LGBTQ+ YPEH.

Moving to the societal level, LGBTQ+ YPEH largely face structural barriers and deficits in social support related to accessing housing and other needs, creating gaps in knowledge and awareness of services. Participants were aware of existing barriers to receiving pet-friendly social services and often lacked knowledge of services that would be inclusive of their companion animals. In general, LGBTQ+ YPEH view homeless services as unwelcoming and often unsafe for LGBTQ+ people [71], so the added layer of pet support creates an additional barrier for young people accessing services. Yet LGBTQ+ YPEH maintained hope for the future, resisting narratives that frame them as "at risk," and a desire to support future generations of LGBTQ+ YPEH [7]. Indeed, the predominance of such hopefulness for the future among participants solidifies the radical healing framework as this can pivot the narrative of LGBTQ+ YPEH from blaming marginalized individuals and instead recognizing systemic oppressions that harm wellbeing. All LGBTQ+ YPEH's narratives reiterated the oft-heard guidance that pathways of healing consist of a lifelong journey rather than a singular destination.

When service providers approach LGBTQ+ youth and their ongoing social and health needs in a piecemeal way, the holistic needs of LGBTQ+ young people are unlikely to be effectively addressed. Primarily, YPEH often struggle to access services that are pet-friendly or they may not be aware of pet-inclusive services. While acknowledging the challenges of building pet-inclusive programming due to cost and safety implications, service providers can still take heed of study findings by brainstorming possibilities and goals toward supporting all youths' needs, including their pet relationships. For example, organizations can begin to implement pet inclusion in incremental ways, starting with attainable changes such as offering kennel services in a secured area for safekeeping of animals while youth are accessing services.

In just the case of companion animals, our study suggests a need for practitioners to acknowledge the novel ways LGBTQ+ youth and LGBTQ+ YPEH resist structural barriers and how their future aspirations, which may not align neatly with existing frameworks of success, are important to their overall motivation and wellbeing, and can foster healing. Many LGBTQ+ YPEH desire to support others experiencing similar adverse circumstances, and see existing services as often untrustworthy due to their embeddedness within the very social structures that produce harm against LGBTQ+ youth. To be successful and actually support youth, services and interventions must take heed of these critiques and center more peer mentoring programs to help youth support each other [72]. LGBTQ+ YPEH aspirations to maintain animal companionship, or have a pet in the future, may seem trivial to practitioners, but may be important to personal motivations for self-betterment among LGBTQ+ youth. Service providers may be inadvertently erasing the ways LGBTQ+ youth foster resilience and resistance by ignoring what LGBTQ+ YPEH consider important to their own wellbeing (in this case, pet companions).

Indeed, this work is a foil to ongoing sociopolitical resistance to marketing and tailoring services to LGBTQ+ young people, and even worse, erasing LGBTQ+ youth from social and health services entirely. For example, in Grant, Michigan, School District officials (as well as the teenage artist) received public backlash for a mural painted by a youth for the teen health center located within their middle school. The mural included children wearing rainbow colors, and other colors typically associated with the transgender and bisexual pride flags [73]. In 2021, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services removed a webpage offering resources to LGBTQ+ youth, including the suicide hotline, following conservative criticism [74]. Several state legislatures have pursued policies limiting inclusive educational and health resources for LGBTQ+ young people (e.g., limits on trans health care, "don't say gay" policies, LGBTQ+ book banning), simultaneously denying the existence of, while reifying, the social structures that enact harm on LGBTQ+ people [75]. While it is clear that delivering *the basic* level of inclusive social and health services to LGBTQ+ young people is already a steep challenge in our current sociopolitical environment, we further argue that a radical healing approach considering the holistic experiences of LGBTQ+ youth is necessary if we are to fundamentally improve social and health services to fully serve those in need.

The present study makes key contributions to understanding LGBTQ+ YPEH experiences with pets, but limitations in scope and focus point to additional areas of inquiry. We only interviewed young people living in Oklahoma, which can constrain the scope of our findings to LGBTQ+ youth in other US states and their regional policies. In addition to the youth themselves, future studies should also interview service providers, not only about their attitudes about including pet companions or emotional support animals within services, but their perceptions of ongoing hostility to tailoring of social and health services to the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ young people. Importantly, service providers could shed light on barriers within service systems that hinder the delivery of integrated, holistic care and support that can drive radical healing, especially among LGBTQ+ young people and their pets [76]. Our use of one-on-one interviews may also have limited youths' perspectives because they were unable to converse with peers on their viewpoints. Focus groups that include both LGBTQ+ young people receiving services and service providers

could foster important dialogue and provide additional insights into differences in attitudes and perceptions of existing barriers and limitations within social and health services. Finally, the LGBTQ+ young people in this study are diverse across gender, sexuality, and race and ethnicity, but our sample size of 17 constrains our ability to adequately apply an intersectional lens to youths' experiences. Understanding LGBTQ+ YPEH experiences across their multiple intersecting identities is warranted to better delineate the potential role of companion animals and structural barriers in their lives [77].

Overall, our study importantly uplifts the underacknowledged voices and narratives of LGBTQ+ young people navigating homelessness. By drawing from the strengths-based perspective of radical healing, our findings highlight the dynamic ways that young people strive to support their own mental health through their companion animal relationships when facing the structural inadequacies of service agencies failing to meet their basic needs. We must continue to not only listen to marginalized youth to learn how to best support them, but also be willing and prepared to implement systemic changes that may challenge the status quo to foster holistic health and healthcare for future generations and beyond.

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