Article

Unveiling the Pathways: Mapping and Understanding Hidden Homelessness Among 2SLGBTQ+ Youth in Ontario

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Abstract: Transphobic and homophobic violence and discrimination within homes and housing programs lead many 2-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (2SLGBTQ+) youth to find alternative, temporary, and insecure housing. These types of living situations are considered "hidden homelessness". This study interviewed 2SLGBTQ+ youth ($n = 6$) and key informants ($n = 12$) who have experienced and/or who support hidden homelessness across three sites in Ontario (Toronto, York Region, and London). The results suggest experiences of hidden homelessness for 2SLGBTQ+ youth are nonlinear, with pathways driven by family conflict combined with the high cost of living and lack of employment, making independent living unaffordable. Additionally, youth avoid services where they experience discrimination and often experience social isolation. In rural and suburban areas, youth have fewer options for safe and inclusive services. When services are accessible, wrap-around supports that address the complexity of their situations help youth exit hidden homelessness. Prevention strategies should focus on addressing family conflict and supporting reunification when it is safe to do so. For those who are unable to return home, there is a need for increased financial support and more affordable housing. Building comprehensive population-based support services is recommended to address the overrepresentation of 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness.

Keywords: 2SLGBTQ+ youth; hidden homelessness; Ontario; Canada; youth homelessness; housing

1. Introduction

2-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (2SLGBTQ+) youth are disproportionately represented among youth experiencing homelessness, making up 25–40% of the homeless youth population across Canada [1–4]. 2SLGBTQ+ youth tend to experience homelessness at younger ages and for longer episodes compared to cisgender and heterosexual youth [1,3]. Youth who become homeless at younger ages often experience multiple challenges compounding over time, including numerous episodes of homelessness, making it increasingly difficult to exit homelessness [3]. 2SLGBTQ+ youth also experience greater risk and higher rates of mental health issues, unemployment, social isolation, discrimination, and violence compared to cisgender and heterosexual youth [2,5–7]. The Canadian definition of youth homelessness states that "youth homelessness" refers to situations in which young people are as described below:

> "*living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence. [. . .] In addition to experiencing economic deprivation and a lack of secure housing, many young people who are homeless lack the personal experience of living independently and at the same time may be in the throes of significant developmental (social, physical, emotional, and cognitive) changes. Few young people choose to be homeless, nor wish to be defined by their homelessness, and the experience is generally negative and stressful.*" [3]

The pathways into homelessness among 2SLGBTQ+ youth are typically due to family rejection and family violence resulting from a young person coming out as 2SLGBTQ+ [1,2]. Transphobic and homophobic violence and discrimination often persists in housing programs, including emergency shelters, which leads many 2SLGBTQ+ youth to find alternative, temporary, and insecure housing [7,8]. This can include staying at a motel/hotel or with a friend, family, sexual/romantic partner, strangers, and/or couch surfing. These types of living situations are referred to as "hidden homelessness" and can be overcrowded and unsafe, and they are often overlooked in research, Point-in-Time counts/homeless counts, and homelessness responses [1,9]. Hidden homelessness also refers to individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate residence and entails living situations that are both physically and emotionally precarious in which individuals are not accessing homeless supports or services [10]. The need to engage this marginalized population with services is essential. As the homelessness response adapts to ongoing provision of services intended to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness, it is critical that youth experiencing hidden homelessness articulate their challenges, identify facilitators, and be included in decision making regarding homelessness policies and service responses [11].

This study explored how the current youth homelessness response in Ontario, Canada, may work to prevent homelessness among 2SLGBTQ+ youth and the barriers that stand in the way of providing timely and appropriate support to 2SLGBTQ+ youth to rapidly exit homelessness by examining the following two research questions:

1. How can government and community services prevent hidden homelessness among 2SLGBTQ+ youth?
2. How is Ontario's homelessness response supporting and preventing chronic homelessness among 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing hidden homelessness?

A youth participatory action research (YPAR) framework was employed, guided by feminist, intersectional, and socio-ecological understandings of the pathways into and out of homelessness among 2SLGBTQ+ youth [12–14]. The objectives of this study were envisioned to broadly guide participants' exploration and critical analysis of Ontario's homelessness response while still allowing for their leadership and direction in identifying key foci and refining project outcomes. The objective of research question #1 was to identify how homelessness prevention services and supports in regions that have moderate to high amounts of youth homelessness supports could better intervene upstream to support 2SLGBTQ+ youth at risk of homelessness, such as addressing problematic home environments and/or supporting safe and secure re-housing. The objective of research question #2 was for participants to identify how Ontario's homelessness response could increase support for 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing hidden homelessness to rapidly exit homelessness. Overall, the study aimed to support 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing or with lived experience of hidden homelessness and key stakeholders to identify and address gaps in service provision in order to prevent chronic homelessness and better support 2SLGBTQ+ youth successfully exit homelessness.

2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative study utilized innovative participatory visual methods to center the involvement of 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing hidden homelessness and to co-generate knowledge with community stakeholders, engage in systemic change, and critically examine Ontario's youth homelessness response. 2SLGBTQ+ youth with lived experience of hidden homelessness were engaged in a variety of research activities throughout this study; however, this article specifically focuses on findings from interviews that were conducted with youth participants and key informants. Interviews with key informants (frontline staff and managers working in programs serving youth experiencing homelessness) mapped the youth homelessness response and services available across Toronto, York Region, and London. One-on-one interviews with youth explored service provisions for 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing hidden homelessness and investigated ways to prevent hidden homelessness as well as the barriers to exiting homelessness among 2SLGBTQ+ youth.

The study took place across three sites with moderate to high numbers of youth-specific homelessness response services—Toronto (high), York Region (moderate), and London (moderate), Ontario. The three sites that were selected (Toronto—high, York Region—moderate, and London—moderate) were all participating communities of the Government of Canada's nationally coordinated Point-in-Time count. There are approximately 53 shelters in Toronto, 6 shelters in York Region, and 7 shelters in London. Two of the sites (Toronto and York Region) have 2SLGBTQ+ youth population-based housing programs. Each site had a team consisting of one to two community partners, a peer researcher (PR), and researchers with expertise in youth homelessness. The PRs at each project site had lived experience in areas of 2SLGBTQ+ identity and/or homelessness. Their knowledge of their project site and 2SLGBTQ+ youth homelessness made them well situated to lead the research recruitment and youth participation activities. PRs were paid, trained, and supported to engage as full and active members of the research team. The project team assembled a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to help guide the research project and ensure that the needs and experiences of participants were prioritized at all stages of the research. Approximately six CAB members were recruited through the research team's existing networks in the homelessness response sector in Canada to consult on the project. The CAB members included representation from each of the project sites (two from each site) and a mix of service providers, including young frontline staff with lived experience of hidden homelessness, from each project site. They advised on the project's recruitment, data collection, analysis, and knowledge mobilization plan. An honorarium was provided for their participation in CAB meetings.

Key informant interviews were conducted with stakeholders working in the homeless sector at each project site and explored the service perspective, response, and understanding of the ways in which 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing hidden homelessness are often targeted. The one-on-one semi-structured youth interviews focused on youths' pathways into and out of hidden homelessness, their experiences with hidden homelessness, and accessing housing supports. Youth were provided honoraria for participating in an interview (CAD 20). Youth who were interviewed in person received an additional CAD 3.00–CAD 4.00 to cover the cost of transportation. This article focuses on the findings and recommendations based on the one-on-one interviews with key informants and youth.

2.1. Sampling

Youth participant recruitment for this project leveraged the research team's network of community partnerships and community connections in Toronto, York Region, and London, which were essential to this study. Community project partners included YMCA GTA, Sprott House (Toronto); Blue Door (York Region); and Youth Opportunities Unlimited/YOU (London). All community partners supported participant recruitment from their various programs by posting study flyers and referring potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Youth who were interested in participating in the study contacted the study coordinator via email and were sent a screening survey and additional information about the study. The inclusion criteria for eligible youth participants included young people aged 16–29, who self-identified as 2SLGBTQ+, and had experienced hidden homelessness (sleeping in a vehicle, staying at a hotel/motel, or staying with a friend, family, sexual/romantic partner, and/or couch-surfing) in Toronto, York Region, and/or London within the last 24 months. Key informants were recruited through community organizations serving youth experiencing homelessness at each site and were selected based on their positions. Research staff reached out to the organizations, described the study's objectives, and requested to interview staff across a variety of positions. Inclusion criteria for key informants included frontline staff and management from youth homelessness organizations in Toronto, York Region, and London.

2.2. Data Collection

After determining eligibility, written informed consent was obtained, and participants were interviewed. Interviews were conducted by the study coordinator and research assistant. Key informant interviews were conducted virtually and audio-recorded using WebEx, a secure video conferencing platform. Key informant interviews focused on current service provisions and recommendations to better serve youth experiencing hidden homelessness within their region. Youth interviews were predominantly conducted in the same format, with the exception of one youth who requested an in-person interview. The one in-person interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder. Youth interviews focused on their experiences with hidden homelessness and recommendations for service improvements in their region. Youth received a CAD 20 honoraria for their one-on-one interview. All audio files were uploaded to a secure drive and then transcribed verbatim using a secure transcription service.

2.3. Analysis

Data from participant interviews were analyzed by members of the study team using thematic analysis [15]. The entire research team familiarized themselves with the data and collectively created a study code book. Two members of the research team then coded the data using Dedoose version 9.2.007 [16]. Emerging themes were identified and refined collaboratively. To conceal participants' identities, all identifying information was removed from the study transcripts prior to analysis and replaced with study ID codes for key informants and names of colors as pseudonyms for youth participants.

2.4. Ethics

Ethics approval was obtained from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) Research Ethics Board (#077/2022).

3. Results

A total of 18 interviews were conducted with youth and key informants. The main findings are organized into the following themes and sub-themes: Hidden homelessness: conceptualizing hidden homelessness, complexities in identifying hidden homelessness, and social isolation; Pathways into and out of hidden homelessness: barriers and facilitators.

3.1. Participants

Eighteen people (*n* = 18) participated in interviews, including 6 youth with lived experience and 12 key informants. Key informants were recruited evenly from Toronto (*n* = 4), York Region (*n* = 4), and London (*n* = 4) and held various positions within their youth-serving organizations: executive/leadership (*n* = 6), frontline (*n* = 5), and administrative (*n* = 1). Six youth participants consented to participate in a one-on-one interview (Toronto *n* = 4, York Region *n* = 1, and London *n* = 1). Youth participants had an average age of 20.5 years. Full demographics on all youth participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Youth Participant Demographics.

Location	*n*	%
Toronto	4	66.66
York Region	1	16.66
London	1	16.66
Age		
16–19	2	33.33
20–23	3	50.00
24–27	1	16.66

Table 1. *Cont.*

Gender Identity		
2 Spirit	1	16.66
Gender Diverse (Bigender, Genderfluid, Non-Binary, Demiboy)	2	33.33
Transgender (Trans, Transfemme)	3	50.00
Sexual Orientation		
Demisexual	1	16.66
Lesbian	1	16.66
Pansexual	1	16.66
Queer	3	50.00
Race		
Aboriginal/Indigenous	3	50.00
African/Black	1	16.66
European	2	33.33
Mixed	3	50.00
White	2	33.33

Note: Participants filled in their gender identity and sexual orientation in their own words and were able to select multiple options for race, resulting in some sections totaling more than 100%.

3.2. Hidden Homelessness

3.2.1. Conceptualizing Hidden Homelessness

Youth participants defined "hidden homelessness" as sleeping on friends' couches, also known as couch surfing, and seeking shelter in unconventional places such as churches, subway stations, backyard shelters, school offices, and gymnasiums. Key informants added that hidden homelessness could also include hanging out in 24-h food establishments, seeking refuge in bus shelters and abandoned buildings, or engaging in transactional sex that provides a place to stay for the night or longer. Staying with friends was described as cramped and overcrowded, with instances where youth felt uncomfortable sharing common areas with several other individuals. When a social network was unavailable, youth stayed in public spaces (e.g., schools and subway stations). From the perspective of service providers, hidden homelessness referred to youth not accessing services. For example, one key informant stated the following:

"I would say that it would be those experiencing homelessness who aren't utilizing maybe shelter or different community organizations that help those experiencing homelessness. So, this could be anybody who might be couch surfing or maybe staying with a friend. Even staying with like a relative, but on a short-term basis. Like where they're staying isn't permanent, however hidden in the sense that they're not kind of marked in the system." (Key Informant 12, London)

All participants noted the instability of hidden homelessness, and youth described having to make frequent changes to their living arrangements. Some youth had slept on friends' couches for weeks to months before finding a more permanent place to stay, while others had sneaked in and out of their friends' houses late at night and early in the morning to avoid detection from parents. Relocating was often due to disputes, feeling unsafe, getting evicted, or overstaying their welcome. One youth participant in Toronto stated the following:

"Nobody really notices, realizes just how bad it is because you're at the whims of everybody else. And if you don't have anybody else, then you're actually homeless. And that is frightening." (Green, Age 18, Toronto)

Moreover, youths' pathways into and out of hidden homelessness were conceptualized as nonlinear in that their living situations fluctuated from being housed to unhoused, and while unhoused, they moved between various spaces, including family, friends, intimate partners, and housing/shelter programs.

3.2.2. Complexities in Identifying Hidden Homelessness

Many of the youth participants also questioned what constituted hidden homelessness. For example, one youth was angered by peers who, in their perspective, left home for a short period of time after having a fight with their parents:

> "*A bunch of my friends kind of copied me and they all started popping away from home just because they didn't want to follow simple rules. Simple mindless rules that would make a house function, like take out the trash, do the dishes, simple things a mother would ask their kid to do. And they just were like 'I don't want to do that' and ran away.*" (Blue, Age 18, London)

Participants described peers in these situations as not being "truly homeless" because they eventually returned home, were under the age of majority, and were not fleeing unsafe situations. This youth participant also described not recognizing the seriousness of their own housing situation when they were in the midst of it: "*I didn't know I was struggling as badly as—I didn't need to struggle that badly*" (Blue, Age 18, London). Having somewhere to sleep, regardless of how precarious it might be, meant youth did not identify as homeless—hidden or otherwise. One youth participant described wanting to access transitional housing programs that offered private rooms and secure housing for two years, but "*you need to spend a certain amount of days or even months in a shelter before you can access that. So, I wanted to access those but I was unable to*" (Yellow, Age 21, Toronto). Similarly, housing programs may not recognize the precarity of a youth's situation; this may be particularly true in less urban areas. A key informant in York Region noted the following:

> "*Just specifically in York Region, I think hidden homelessness looks a little different than Toronto because we're so spread out. And there isn't the same level of awareness. . .nor is there the same level of acceptance, I think, in the community.*" (Key Informant 6, York Region)

Identifying as experiencing homelessness (including hidden homelessness) was further complicated by factors such as social stigma, shame, and guilt, which are explored further in the following sections. A Toronto key informant aptly summarized the following: "*it's a very complex situation and it's a modern crisis that we think, and people that have been in this sector for more than 20 years have been saying that, it's unprecedented, never seen in this dimension in, at least in the last 20 years*" (Key Informant 3, Toronto).

3.2.3. Social Isolation

Feelings of loneliness and isolation were prevalent among participants who had experienced hidden homelessness. A youth participant in Toronto who was moving between friends' houses recalled, "*I lived in a home for three months where everybody in that home hated me and I only stayed there because I had nowhere else to go*" (Green, Age 18, Toronto). Youth participants agreed that being dependent on others for a place to sleep led to strained relationships with friends and extended family:

> "*All of the situations where I've been staying with other people have been extremely traumatic for me. . .it probably won't be for everybody. But the fact that you kind of have to become a burden on other people to be able to survive, it ruins a lot of things for you. Most of the people I was friends with last year are not friends with me anymore.*" (Green, Age 18, Toronto)

Feelings of peer and family rejection translated into feelings of being unlovable, and these difficult self-perceptions remained with the youth even after they found more permanent housing:

> "*It's just a looming dread that I need to stay alive, I need to maintain this...for the past year or so I've just been, I've been constantly afraid that I have been a burden to some of the people around me. A burden on the people around me because that's how I was while I was couch surfing.*" (Green, Age 18, Toronto)

While this one youth spoke eloquently about their challenges with social connection while experiencing homelessness, the sentiment was also highlighted by key informants noting that "*a lot of the youth might feel isolated*" if they have no family or peers who accept them or have similar identities (Key Informant 4, Toronto). As we go on to describe, when experiencing hidden homelessness, youth were also faced with significant barriers to accessing support services and housing programs.

3.3. Pathways into and out of Hidden Homelessness

Non-linear pathways into and out of homelessness were made challenging by barriers in navigating provincial and local systems of social support, such as government financial support and municipal housing programs. Conversely, when these support systems worked well for youth, the pathways out of hidden homelessness were made easier. The specific barriers and facilitators noted by participants are discussed in more detail below.

3.3.1. Barriers

Family Conflict

Most of the youth described entering hidden homelessness because of family conflict and/or abuse. 2SLGBTQ+ identity-based parental rejection was the leading cause of youth leaving home among youth participants:

"*My parents kicked me out, because he found out I was, I guess, dating my ex. . . . But because she was a girl, they didn't approve of it. So, I was kicked out.*" (Red, Age 26, Toronto)

Youth reflected on the complexities of family conflict. For example, one participant noted that identity-based conflict with her parents intersected with her culture's strong sense of family values, and the youth and parents' mental health struggles. This youth moved into and out of her parent's home because of these complex challenges. The participant described the following:

"*It seemed like an endless cycle. Because my parents also have some mental health issues. That kind of influenced that decision of sometimes telling me to leave. But my culture is also very family-oriented. So, it was always a short period of time because they always said that you should come back, and we talked about it. It only lasted maybe, not more than a few weeks.*" (Yellow, Age 21, Toronto)

Key informants reported that religious beliefs led some parents to reject their children on account of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. For some youth, even the fear of coming out to family can be enough for them to leave home. As one key informant explained the following:

"*Not even rejection outright from their family, but fear of rejection, I think that's really important to note. . .a lot of folks will be staying with friends, or they will be finding somewhere else to live, because they don't want to have the conversation, because they are afraid that this is the result anyway.*" (Key Informant 5, York Region)

In cases where youth were already living outside their family home, they described poverty and failed attempts to live with romantic partners as driving factors of homelessness.

High Cost of Living

For youth who reported needing to live outside of their family home, the high cost of living, limited job opportunities, and lack of affordable housing were all significant obstacles to securing independent housing and contributed to hidden homelessness. Transgender and gender-diverse participants expressed transphobic employers to be a major barrier to securing and maintaining employment: "*on my resume, I put my pronouns, and I tell people that I'm trans and I mean, the responses. . .I barely hear anything back*" (Purple, Age 21, Toronto). All the youth participants were receiving some form of government assistance, such as Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), but these

social supports were insufficient to meet their basic needs, such as food and housing. One youth who was receiving government support through the Ontario Works (OW) program shared their monthly spending budget:

> "*I have to go to the food bank in the middle of the month simply because I have a $100 food budget with a $40 leftover money budget. I'm sorry, no. $100 doesn't even get somebody through two weeks, let alone a month.*" (Blue, Age 18, London)

Unwelcome or unwilling to go home and unable to afford rent, maintaining hidden homelessness meant that youth could only spend their money on other basic needs, such as food.

Lack of 2SLGBTQ+ Youth Services

Youth and key informants described the lack of support services that are inclusive to 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing hidden homelessness. Youth participants described identity-based support services and housing programs for youth to be scarce and plagued with long waitlists. Youth reported receiving inconsistent support at social services, and one youth described feeling as though they got "*really lucky*" to receive help (Green, Age 18, Toronto). They went on to explain the following: "*it's all waitlists and gatekeeping based on hey, you are not disabled enough, you are not mentally ill enough, you are not homeless enough to access these services.*" The lack of 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive and affirming services was especially pronounced for youth in London and York Region. A key informant in London noted that 2SLGBTQ+ services were predominantly geared towards adults, with few services available for youth experiencing homelessness:

> "*I find that most LGBTQ services, at least in London itself, kind of cater more towards an adult population. . . . you might find like 14- to 16- or like 12- to 16-year-olds and then you have like 25 up and there's like this gap in this, the young adult, older teenage area that there's not as much support . . . And I think also within those groups specifically, they're not specific to LGBTQ folks who are experiencing homelessness.*" (Key Informant 12, London)

An informant expressed a similar effect in York Region:

> "*There is not a center, no place where the [2SLGBTQ+] youth can come together. There is a huge lack of services. Even in terms of specific services like health care or mental health, for the community. There is a huge gap in the industry, basically nothing.*" (Key Informant 8, York Region)

A key informant from York Region reported that "*we need to acknowledge that our big institutions are not safe spaces for the queer community.*" Key informants across sites reported that population-based programs for 2SLGBTQ+ youth did not sufficiently deal with the complexity of 2SLGBTQ+ youth homelessness, citing the greater need for gender-affirming education and healthcare as well as employment, food, and transportation services.

2SLGBTQ+ Stigma

The participants' testimonials of the stigma that 2SLGBTQ+ youth experience when accessing youth services as well as adult services in their regions further emphasized the need for population-based services. One youth participant reported, "*There is not a lot of staff that understands us, or using the right pronouns, or being really accommodating.*" (Yellow, Age 21, Toronto). Fear of being misgendered, experiencing violence from shelter staff and youth residents, and having to hide their gender identity and/or sexual orientation were all described. One key informant explained the following:

> "*Some of the challenges is that they don't always feel safe to be out. Sometimes even in the shelter system, youth from the community, they report, they don't feel safe. Not just with other clients, but also with the staff. And that's one of the reasons why lots of times they don't access the shelter system. But they rather stay in a hidden homelessness situation.*"
> (Key Informant 8, York Region)

Another key informant noted:

"*Even though the services are saying that they are 2SLGBTQI+-friendly and supportive, they're still experiencing a lot of harm within those situations, especially our students who are identifying as trans.*" (Key Informant 5, York Region)

Even programs supposedly tailored to be 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive could be perpetuating stigma towards 2SLGBTQ+ youth. Youth participants and key informants agreed that sometimes, rather than supporting youth to exit homelessness, negative experiences such as being misgendered and feeling threatened when interacting with staff or other service users can result in youth avoiding services altogether, creating a direct pathway into hidden homelessness.

Intersectional Exclusion

Youth participants reported avoiding support services and housing programs on account of intersectional exclusion based on their race and gender. For example, one participant stated the following:

"*I experienced a lot of discrimination. . . you're dealing with transphobia, you're dealing with racism.*" (Purple, Age 21, Toronto)

Youth articulated that this also occurred in 2SLGBTQ+-populations-based services:

"*A lot of LGBTQ-specific organizations might be sensitive about being queer, but they're very lacking of being culturally sensitive. So, they built up a cultural environment, which is very, I'm sorry to say this, but very Canadian, Whitewashed. And everyone has to follow that or, if not, they kind of exclude you or make you leave the organization.*" (Yellow, Age 21, Toronto)

This sentiment was echoed by key informants who noted the scarcity of services that provide intersectional support to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and queer youth. For instance, one key informant stated the following:

"*There's a huge gap for BIPOC youth services specifically who are queer. And a lot of those programs are predominantly White spaces.*" (Key Informant 14, Toronto)

Other Barriers to Service Area

Participants identified several other barriers to service access for youth experiencing hidden homelessness, which were not necessarily related to the youth's identity but increased the likelihood of the youth entering hidden homelessness. These are discussed briefly under three sub-themes: geographic disparities, age restrictions and lack of transitional services, and rigid policies and rules.

- Geographic Disparities

The majority of support services and housing programs are in larger urban settings, creating access challenges for youth in rural communities and suburban settings. A key informant in London noted that "*a lot of youth will gravitate towards a city environment for additional resources*" (Key Informant 12, London). Key informants also reported that youth were commuting up to two hours and, at times, uprooting their lives to move to a different city to access support services and housing programs. This was echoed by youth participants in York Region who demonstrated familiarity with 2SLGBTQ+ services in Toronto's city center. Participants located in London described the downtown location of the main youth service as unsafe and difficult to access, especially if they were packing a lot of belongings. Not being able to physically access the limited existing support services and housing programs left youth disconnected and hidden from service providers.

- Lack of Transitional Services

Youth who were able to access support services and housing programs were not always able to stay for the time they needed to transition into more stable housing. One key informant explained the following:

"So, if the age out is 26, if the age out is 20, if the age out is 29th birthday, there's no follow up afterward. Basically, messaging is often, we can only help you to try and transition your care after, a few months after, and then you're on your own. There's nothing to follow up to support those youth after." (Key Informant 4, Toronto)

A lack of transitional services for youth who age out of programs leaves youth unsupported and at increased risk of returning to hidden homelessness.

3.3.2. Facilitators

- Strengthening Social Supports

Youth described how their friends and romantic partners were influential in their ability to exit hidden homelessness. A youth participant shared the following:

"I started couch surfing then I was told [by a friend], 'If you pay rent you can stay here for as long as you want.' So, I started living with my best friend, and paying rent." (Pink, Age 23, York Region)

Finding shared accommodations helped to manage the high cost of housing. Relatedly, key informants described supporting youth to rebuild and strengthen their social networks. This could take the form of linking up youth to be roommates or assisting in re-establishing connections with their parents. Notably, only one youth participant reported currently living back with their parents. The rest of the youth participants were seeking or had found stable housing through transitional housing programs or by living with friends or an intimate partner.

- Accessing Wrap-Around Support Services

Key informants were unable to identify any services in their regions that specifically addressed the needs of youth experiencing hidden homelessness. However, low-barrier interventions such as outreach programs and drop-in services were described as the most well suited to engage and support 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing hidden homelessness, given they are geared towards youth who are otherwise reticent or experience challenges accessing support. One key informant noted changes to their intake process to better identify and support youth experiencing hidden homelessness:

"Just within the past three to five years have developed an intake specific to asking questions to suss out whether or not somebody is experiencing hidden homelessness. So, then we could do referrals to our housing programs through diversion or our housing programs through our transitional housing. So, really, it's the intake that matters because if you check off housed, that's great, you're never going to talk to them about housing ever again, right?" (Key Informant 11, London)

Some of the youth participants were able to access support services and/or housing programs that they described as being efficiently linked to wrap-around services, such as food banks, employment, academic support, and healthcare. For example, one youth described accessing services:

"I received food help, food supplies. And that was an agency who also provided gift cards on a monthly basis. So, that was a big help." (Yellow, Age 21, Toronto)

Another youth described accessing a youth-focused service in London:

"My worker is the one who helped me fill out all my forms, get all my information straight [...] because I had a lot of the important stuff already, she was able to work very quickly and get me a place to stay." (Blue, Age 18, London)

This was echoed by several key informants who described their work providing referrals and linkages as a major benefitting factor for youth exiting homelessness. However, key informants also warned that linking youth to numerous services that require attending multiple appointments can be overwhelming, especially if there are no accompanying support funds for transportation. One key informant described supporting youth and

trying to create a "*welcoming, safe space to kind of identify where they're at and how we can help support them with those next steps*" (Key Informant 10, London). Key informants across the three sites agreed that letting youth lead the way in identifying the types of support they need is critical.

4. Discussion

The study findings echo previous research that has identified that 2SLGBTQ+ youth are at increased risk of hidden homelessness because they often avoid support services and housing programs due to 2SLGBTQ+ identity-based discrimination, stigma, and safety concerns [2,5,7,8]. By interviewing 2SLGBTQ+ youth with experiences of hidden homelessness and key informants who support 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness, we learned more about the nuances of this phenomenon in Ontario.

The study findings suggest that youth experienced a wide range of precarious living situations that aligned with the definition of hidden homelessness, including seeking shelter in temporary and unconventional places that were often overcrowded, uncomfortable, and/or unsafe. Youth described being hidden from homeless services and supports. Being hidden from conventional services and supports increases the likelihood of 2SLGBTQ+ youth not being included in homeless counts and national statistics on homelessness. Youth also expressed a reticence to identify themselves or peers as homeless, which contributes to a more nuanced understanding of being hidden from services [17]. Youth who have a place to stay may not realize that they can seek supports. This research highlights that the experiences of hidden homelessness impact the mental and physical wellbeing of 2SLGBTQ+ youth who feel highly isolated and vulnerable as they struggle to find support within their social network and through social services.

The findings suggest that community support services are missing opportunities to prevent hidden homelessness amongst 2SLGBTQ+ youth by not addressing the challenges that youth and their families experience at home. Previous studies have identified worsening family connectedness between parents and 2SLGBTQ+ youth in Canada [18]. Promising research emerging from the Family Acceptance Project based out of San Francisco State University illustrated how developing family-focused supports that are ethnically and religiously inclusive can resolve family conflict and promote parental support of their 2SLGBTQ+ children [19,20]. Parental support and family connectedness has been shown to have numerous physical and mental health benefits for 2SLGBTQ+ youth [21]. This is especially relevant considering the high risk of trauma that 2SLGBTQ+ youth experience as a result of living in a cisnormative and heteronormative society [22]. Ontario's homelessness prevention response should provide families with the appropriate education and resources to accept their 2SLGBTQ+ youth and support them to stay in the home where they can thrive under the care of their family when it is safe to do so.

A second missed opportunity by the government to prevent hidden homelessness among 2SLGBTQ+ youth in Ontario revolves around the two social assistance programs in Ontario—Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). At the time of writing, the maximum amount of monthly support for someone on OW was CAD 733 and CAD 1368 for those on ODSP. This leaves unattached individuals on OW living 37% under the poverty line and individuals on ODSP living 57% under the poverty line [23]. In their study of 2SLGBTQ+ Ontarians on social assistance, Daley et al. argued that the Ontario government needs to raise the level of social assistance to meet the true cost of living [24]. They further highlighted that social assistance services should implement and enforce equity-related employment standards that address intersections of oppression and support diverse 2SLGBTQ+ people in "securing safe(r) employment, thus addressing the employment discrimination and barriers that lead many 2SLGBTQ+ people to require [social assistance]" (n.p.). Additionally, our study findings suggest that building subsidized population-based housing in suburban and rural regions would provide much needed long-term housing for 2SLGBTQ+ youth who cannot live with their parents.

The identified pathways out of hidden homelessness suggest that when youth are linked to 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive wrap-around services and receive affirming and safe support, the risk of chronic homelessness is reduced, and youth can transition out of homelessness. These successes suggest that 2SLGBTQ+ population-based support services and housing programs can have a marked impact on addressing the complex needs of 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing hidden homelessness.

Limitations

The study results must be interpreted with caution, given that the participant pool was small and only represented three regions in Ontario; as such, the results are not generalizable. We suspect that the challenge with recruiting may be indicative of a larger challenge of working with this hard-to-reach population who may need to prioritize finding and maintaining housing and other basic needs over their volunteer participation in research. There is also a risk of a positive response bias, especially by key informants who may have wanted to present their organization, work, or region in a favorable way. Moreover, Ontario is a large and diverse province. While this project did include representation from participants who identified as Indigenous and immigrant, there were not enough participants in total to disaggregate the data in relation to these differences. Future research would benefit from a larger participant pool and/or focusing on specific sub-populations (e.g., racialized, refugee, Indigenous, and transgender) to further illuminate the unique and dynamic experiences of youth experiencing hidden homelessness.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the perspectives of 2SLGBTQ+ youth who have experienced hidden homelessness and key informants at youth-serving organizations. Interviews focused on youths' experiences of hidden homelessness and access to services as well as government and community support services and housing programs that are preventing hidden homelessness among 2SLGBTQ+ youth. Pathways into hidden homelessness are primarily due to parental conflict and/or abuse. 2SLGBTQ+ youths' ability to secure independent housing is often limited because of identity-based discrimination, social stigma, lack of affordable housing, and the high cost of living. Without a stable place to live, youth can feel their social network deteriorate, and they risk becoming socially isolated. The challenges with which 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing hidden homelessness in Ontario are faced suggest the need for more targeted and population-based services and supports. The lack of these services outside of major metropolitan areas forces youth in rural and remote areas to leave their communities and travel long distances to access support services and housing programs, often resulting in further marginalization [25]. Services should provide transitional support for young people as they age out of youth programming into adult services and/or to independence. Safety policies should be developed that protect clients/residents while at the same time avoid further exacerbating the risk of hidden or abject homelessness [26]. It is imperative that the development of population-based services be trauma-informed and operate from a decolonizing and anti-racist framework.

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