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### Come Out Come Out Wherever You Are: A Content Analysis of Homeless Transgender Youth in Social Service Literature

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Portland State University McNair Research Journal 2015

**Come Out Come Out Wherever You Are: A Content Analysis of Homeless  
Transgender Youth in Social Service Literature**

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## **Abstract**

Homeless, transgender youth are underrepresented in research studies in the United States and over-represented among the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) transitional-age (16 – 24) homeless youth population, at a reported 20 - 40% of the entire homeless youth population. Although this figure is staggering, it is not representative of the actual number of LGBTQ youth currently living on the streets. Exact numbers are unknown due to fear of victimization and discrimination faced both by their homeless peers and in services that are established for homeless youth. This study critically examined how homeless, transgender, transitional-age youth are represented in or ignored by the social service scholarly literature. The study implemented a thematic analysis of academic articles from 2008 - 2013 with a specific focus on homeless, transitional-age youth found in the Social Services Abstract database. Themes identified from the selected articles relate to perceptions of services, barriers to care, gender identity, risk factors, and a comparison of heterosexual to homosexual homeless youth. These factors will be used to determine the level of representation or exclusion from available studies about homeless transgender youth.

**Keywords:** transgender, homeless, youth, transitional-age, services, community support

## Introduction

Although the homeless youth population in the United States is near impossible to precisely calculate, a 2010 report by the Center for American Progress indicates that 1.6 – 2.8 million youth in the United States on any given night are homeless. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth comprise 20 - 40% of homeless young people, compared to only 5 - 10% of the general youth population. While youth homelessness has been the subject of multiple academic articles, research focusing on homeless self-identified transgender youth has been extremely limited in both scope and quantity. An individualized study of homeless self-identified transgender youth is necessary to have a better understanding of how they are accommodated throughout homeless youth services, especially in how policy and cultural competency training effect shelter dynamics.

When it comes to research on homeless self-identified transgender youth, most scholars readily agree that the population is over-represented in the homeless youth community yet highly underrepresented in current research. This argument usually ends, however, with studies that primarily focus on homeless youth as a whole. Some studies include all members of both the homeless youth population and homeless gender non-conforming population into broad research, while others, albeit very few, have focused on homeless transgender specific research. This is troubling, given that homeless transgender youth have specific needs that differ from other members of the homeless youth community and are not addressed in the majority of services available to homeless youth on a national level. Necessary studies focusing specifically on addressing the issues that homeless transgender youth face when accessing services and the likelihood of this vulnerable population having positive experiences in spaces that are expected to be safe and secure are limited. Drawing attention to the need for individualized homeless transgender youth, this study pays special attention to what is lacking in academic literature with a specific focus on this homeless population. Persons who identify as gender non-conforming are often stigmatized and excluded from the dominant group and are more often than not “barred from equal access to resources, rights, and protection because of their devalued social identity and status” (Button, O’Connell & Gealt, 2012, p. 25). The realities of institutionalized oppression are evident in the marginalization, discrimination, and victimization of homeless transgender youth, even in the service systems that have been established to offer support and security.

Given their increased risk of poverty and homelessness, transgender youth are in need of adequate and intentionally respectful homeless services. Youth focused homeless services are designed to be a social safety net for those who need a secure place to access and attain support in getting back on their feet. Currently, transgender youth are left to struggle against substantial barriers without that needed safety net (Mottet & Ohle, 2006, p. 83-84). This study critically analyzed the content of existing research and for how homeless transgender youth are either included or excluded in the context of academic literature. The content analysis draws attention to and specifically addresses how homeless transgender youth are included or excluded from current academic literature.

The study draws on intersectionality theory (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 13) to emphasize the links between class, gender, and sexuality and how the system of patriarchy perpetuates marginalization within this population. Although homeless research for transgender youth is gradually increasing, what is missing in academic literature is “an overview of practice models for organizations that provide services, safe spaces, and advocacy for transgender youth” (Shepard, 2013, p. 98). This study evaluated existing academic literature, discussing this gap in academic literature and postulates the necessity of further research and planning for transgender specific services. The study answered the following research question: among academic journals published in the United States between 2008 and 2013 with focus on youth homelessness, how are transgender youth included or excluded? If homeless transgender youth are included in the articles included in this

sample, what is the language and context being used? If they are excluded from articles in the sample, what homeless population is being discussed and in what context? How does exclusion affect homeless transgender youth populations?

## Review of the Literature

The current social service system, as well as academic research, has failed homeless LGBTQ transitional-age youth, specifically transgender homeless youth. This failure is reiterated in the academic literature on the subject of homeless youth populations. As much as 43% of homeless LGBTQ transitional-age youth have been forced out of their homes, either familial and/or foster, because of family prejudice toward their sexual orientation or gender identity, lack of understanding, and plain and simple homophobic ideologies (Durso & Gates, 2012, p. 9). Transgender youth often share scenarios of being told to leave the minute they shared their gender identity with family. The Ali Forney Center in New York City reported that 77% of their LGBTQ clients had experienced physical or emotional abuse, including assault, sexual assault, and even attempted murder at the hands of their families (Quintana, Rosenthal & Krehely, 2010, p. 9). Collectively, homeless transgender youth face violence, homophobia, and transphobia in accessing social services that is often similar to the situations that caused them to leave home in the first place. As many as 20 to 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT[Q] (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [queer]) (Ray, 2010, pg. 180-181). These numbers are slightly speculative due to the inability to accurately count and report in a transient and research wary population. Homeless transgender youth are part of a community that is already marginalized, and essentially invisible by societal expectations of gender identity and expression.

According to Nancy Taylor (1994), lack of definition, stigma, and visibility of homeless LGBTQ youth partially explain why public policy change efforts have failed. Taylor also stresses that before a community will change social policy for a specific population, they need to first recognize that the population exists. As paramount as the need for validating the concept of visibility for transgender youth, one obstacle in defining this homeless population has been the lack of ability in quantifying the number of LGBT youth. Many LGBT youth, homeless transgender young people in particular, hide their sexual identities due to the social stigma associated with being a sexual minority (Kidd, 2007; Taylor 1994). By directly addressing the above mentioned issues of this vulnerable population in academic literature, academics can provide authenticating awareness to this problematic societal and political issue in the United States.

Western society has constructed gender as being *either* male or female. This socially constructed gender binary aids in the facilitation of an anti-homosexual and anti-transgender ideology toward those who deviate from traditional gender norms, perpetuating homophobia and transphobia. While gender includes male and female an individual's expression exists on a spectrum that is vast and complex. Wilchins (2004) states, "Challenging oppressive gender structures and making gender rights a priority are critical steps toward universal freedom from punishment for gender nonconformity" (p. 27). Within the homeless LGBTQ youth population transgender youth experience a higher incidence of violence and victimization in large part due to their gender expression. The implications for homeless transgender youth in deconstructing this binary are that the implementation of national policy would allow for their program and shelter needs to be established across the board in agencies.

Dean Spade (2008) states that "the majority of homeless shelter systems in the United States have no written policies regarding the placement of trans [gender] residents and therefore enforce this myth [that transgender people do not exist] in their daily operations by placing people according to birth-assigned gender" (p. 36). Current national and state-by-state policy, as limited as it is, is a blanket policy for all homeless youth and is limited in its scope and verbiage. The

majority of shelter systems have strict policies in place regarding sex segregation. The problems youth face are stated in the literature by Thaler, Bermudez, and Sommer (2009):

Too often, transgender youth are misunderstood and mistreated, even harassed, assaulted, or raped by the staff and other residents at temporary homeless shelters and youth transitional living programs. When these facilities refuse to accept transgender youth, or fail to treat them in accordance with their gender identity, these youth are put in an untenable situation: they must either stifle their authentic gender identity in order to access services and treatment, to the detriment of their overall well-being, or they must live on the streets. (157)

As problematic as this information is, a handful of organizations nationally have implemented policy conducive to homeless youths' gender identity and expression as opposed to the socially constructed gender binary, related to overall treatment, especially in regards to sex segregation. It is pivotal for all youth homeless shelters to take the necessary precautions to protect transgender youth by enforcing trans-inclusive nondiscrimination policies on a national level and rigorously enforced by funders of these agencies. I would highly suggest the implementation of mandatory sensitivity training for all staff and a zero-tolerance policy; this policy would be expected from not only staff but also all clients utilizing these services. The implementation of this policy would be the first step in offering a safe space for transgender youth.

Institutional policy in social service organizations is pervasively heterosexist and transphobic; this is evident in that a number of homeless shelter programs have no written policies regarding bed assignments of transgender youth. Consequently they are placed according to their assigned sex at birth rather than their gender identification/expression. Dean Spade states (2008), "For many transgender people, this means that seeking shelter means becoming a target for harassment and assault in a large facility; this results in chronic homelessness for many who are afraid to face such conditions" (p. 36). Acknowledgement of transgender clients by social service agencies is questionable, which further perpetuates the societal marginalization and discrimination of these youth. In this context, homeless transgender youth not only have their voices muted but their agency and self-determination has been diminished through pervasive systematic heterosexism and patriarchal ideology. "Discrimination and lack of LGBT[Q]-affirmative services often makes homelessness more dangerous for sexual and gender minorities than for the general [homeless] population" (Yu, 2010, p. 341). Many youth who identify as transgender and are forced to comply with shelter policy regarding sex segregation will choose to be on the streets rather than conform to heteronormative expressions of gender identity. This situation leaves youth at a higher risk of facing street victimization and harassment.

Unfortunately, federal funding is insufficient in reaching the majority of LGBTQ homeless youth. Lack of state, local, and federal government funding is said to be the primary barrier to improvement in services related specifically to the reduction of LGBTQ related services (Durso & Gates, 2012, p. 4). The majority of LGBTQ homeless youth may never receive access to support services or housing opportunities, and most community-based providers serving this population allude to a lack of bed capacity as their primary concern. "Less than a dozen local nonprofit organizations nation-wide offer focused services to LGBTQ homeless youth, and most are either on the west or east coasts" (LGBTQ Youth, n.d.). Limited resources are, in effect, another explanation for the inability of most facilities to offer LGBTQ specific services that address identifiable needs. Benjamin Shepard (2013) states, "with federal and state funds for services, shelters, and housing for homeless youth lacking, trans [gender] youth are forced to rely on their own networks for survival" (p. 101). Without secure and inclusive access to social service facilities and organizations, homeless transgender youth are compelled to survive on the street; such survival can at times contribute to young people engaging in a range of high-risk behaviors in order to meet basic survival needs (Cray, Miller, & Durso, 2013, p. 15-16).

The needs of homeless transgender youth far surpass the availability of non-restrictive, inclusive, and secure environments to seek services and shelter. What these organizations need is explicit cultural sensitivity and non-discriminatory training for staff and volunteers who operate necessary services in order to comply with specific needs of this homeless population. "Clear written policies covering issues such as respect, confidentiality, housing placement, showering and bathroom arrangements, and harassment should be developed and all staff should know and understand them"(Mottet & Ohle, 2006, p.99). The increase in staff training can be established with funding increases specified for staff cultural sensitivity training in service agencies. An in-house policy of respect in regards to a youth's self-identified gender identity and expression cannot be understated in order for transgender youth to gain a sense of self-efficacy and transition off the streets. "In order to better protect LGBT[Q] youth in these housing programs from violence, social service agencies must adopt regulations aimed at curbing all violence in homeless youth programs as well as regulations addressing the particular problems faced by LGBT[Q] youth" (Hunter, 2008, p. 543). I find it essential to reiterate the importance of a secure and inclusive environment to the success of homeless transgender youth to end their individual cycle of homelessness. Ernst Hunter (2008) emphasized this importance:

Because LGBT[Q] youth are particularly vulnerable to abuse in homeless youth facilities and they constitute such a large percentage of the youth that agencies regulating these facilities are charged with protecting, these agencies must enact regulations specifically addressing the problems faced by homeless LGBT[Q] youth. These regulations should include non-discrimination policies, mandated LGBT[Q] sensitivity training, and policies promoting the formation of homeless youth housing programs specifically for LGBT[Q] youth. Such regulations are an important step toward remedying the widely unaddressed problems faced by homeless LGBT[Q] youth (p. 552-553).

When transgender youth find themselves on the streets, sadly it is a typical result of ostracization from either their familial home and/or human services organizations (i.e. group homes, foster care, etc.) (Hunter, 2008, p. 545-546). These barriers to care complicate potential efforts made by homeless transgender youth aiming for self-determination. This exclusion can create apprehension about accessing services and many youth find that staying on the street may just be better for them.

As transgender youth find themselves on the streets, they tend to have experiences different from their homeless peers. Transgender youth who are accessing basic services, shelter and housing facilities, experience additional factors which include "particularly high rates of mental health and substance use problems, suicidal acts, violent victimization, and a range of HIV risk behaviors" (Keuroghlain, Shtasel, & Bassuk, 2014, p. 66). Homeless transgender youth are both forced and sometimes willing to do what many may consider outrageous just to survive. A 2013 report by the Center for American Progress stated that "engaging in sex as a means of survival increases exposure to potential trauma for these youth, and increases their vulnerability to violence, rape, and exposure to disease" (p. 15). Rather than seeking out available services, some youth on the street resort to dangerous sexual acts because service agencies that have been established to prevent the very experiences are not meeting that need. Given the intense needs of LGBT youth experiencing homelessness, it is imperative to understand their unique experiences and develop responsive practices and policies (Keuroghlain, et al., 2014). Homeless transgender and LGB youth have very similar needs when accessing services. However, transgender youth face segregation issues in the housing aspect of services and experiences of discrimination and victimization both on the streets and within available services. This disparity is especially important to acknowledge and has been reiterated in the aspect of the academic literature search in the Social Service Abstract database that was used in this content analysis study. Inadequate social services bring about a lack of knowledge about around issues that surround transgender homelessness within social services and the general population. This perpetuates existing stigmatization and oppression of an

already marginalized group. Marginalization frequently leads to internalized oppression, which further affects whether or not transgender youth will seek out and find support within the available services (Spicer, 2010). By emphasizing the lack of academic literature available in a database that targets future social service workers this study will support the specific needs of transgender young people in agencies that offer homeless services.

## **Methods:**

This study investigated research on how homeless, transgender youth are included or excluded in current academic literature and what that looks like in regards to this population. Many studies have been conducted on the experiences of homeless youth in accessing services; however, homeless transgender youth are all but invisible in academic literature in the United States.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Empirical studies and reviews related to homeless youth in the United States during the years 2008 – 2013 were identified using academic literature indexed in the Social Service Abstract database using the keywords *homeless AND (youth OR transitional-age) AND (services OR community support)*. The search resulted in 146 non-duplicated articles, 15 of which were randomly selected for analysis. These keywords reflect overarching themes associated with homeless youth, with the goal of identifying whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or specifically transgender youth studies are included in the resulting search in the general social service literature. The following content categories were examined in the initial reading of the random sampled academic literature: methods, data collection, settings, point of service, demographics, risk factors, protective behaviors, barriers to service, correlates to homelessness, policy, and sources. In using the basic premise of a conventional content analysis, the aim of this study was to describe a phenomenon with limited research literature on a specific subject (Hsieh, 2005, p. 1279). Developing categories were initially used to decide the content importance of each academic article and create definitions of each primary category. Next, subcategories were developed in order to identify more specific content of each article and allow for the prevalence to facilitate a more focused analysis of how transgender youth are represented or excluded from each article.

In the second reading of the randomly sampled literature, more specific analysis focused on the initial content themes and subcategories were then created for analysis. They are as follows: settings depict the geographical location of the study and the type of social service represented in the study. Point of service depicts the service program (i.e. basic services, mental health, etc.). Demographics are representative of the youth in the study. Risk factors depict youths' experiences coinciding with homelessness (i.e. substance use, victimization, etc.). Protective behaviors depict how youths manage aspects of self-preservation in correlation to homelessness. Barriers to service are the contributing factors that prevent homeless youth from accessing social services (i.e. discrimination, mental illness, etc.). Correlates to homelessness are the physical and psychological dynamics that have made homelessness the only option youth feel they are left with (i.e. kicked out, runaway, etc.). Policy represents federal, state, local, and agency policy established for homeless youth. Sources depict who is being used to back up the researchers' argument (i.e. government, academic, etc.).

Given that my literature search for this study resulted in a small sample, I can only assume that the academic literature search conducted for this study may have been too limited in its search criteria. Therefore, I chose to do the same search in the Social Service Abstract database using the same search words, omitting the date restrictions. This revised search resulted in only 399 academic studies. I also did a search using the original keywords, using the specific date range of 2008 – 2013 in the Social Service Abstract database; the only difference with this search was adding transgender into the keywords. This search resulted in three articles. Removing the date



restriction resulted in four articles. I find these searches problematic considering the amount of sources I located for my literature review using Google Scholar with the same search terms "homeless AND (youth OR transitional-age) AND (services OR community support) AND (transgender)", also using the specific date range from 2008 – 2013 which resulted in 5,600 articles and 20,200 when transgender was removed from the list.

## Findings

In my initial analysis, I anticipated a minimum of five articles that included transgender youth, specifically information tailored to the needs of homeless transgender youth when accessing services. However, homeless transgender youth are effectively absent from my random sample of academic literature. Of the 15 randomly sampled articles, 13 did not mention this population at all. Two of the articles focused on LGB youth but with no mention of transgender youth; Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2012) discussed a developmental milestone approach in direct correlation to homelessness among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and subsequent risk factors. This study was a comparison of homeless and non-homeless LGB youth focusing on risk factors that are related to this population becoming homeless. Participants included 156 self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth ages 14 - 21. Grafsky, Letcher, Slesnick, and Serovich (2011) also studied risk factors for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. Risk factors included increased substance use and mental health symptoms with the correlation between treatment for "street-living youth GLB and non-GLB identified youth" (p. 572). Participants ranged between 14 – 22 years and totaled 268; 52 identified as GLB and 205 identified as heterosexual.

Three articles mentioned transgender youth, but only in the content of the study's methods and/or measures. One study (Tyler, et al., 2012) "examines frequency and correlates of service utilization" (p. 1344) by homeless youth that examined the traits that are connected with service utilization. Of the 249 participants ages 14 – 21, 137 were female identified, 112 were male identified, and 44 identified as LGBT. The second article that scarcely mentioned transgender youth is by Tyler (2008). This study compared homeless heterosexual male and female participants and homeless GLB participants in the context of the correlation with early events of sexual abuse and neglect, depressive symptoms, risky sexual behavior, and survival sex with sexual victimization. Another aspect of this study examined the extent of sexual orientation and sexual victimization. Participants included 69 females and 103 males ages 19 – 26; 31 self-identified as GLB. Kennedy, et al. (2012) studied the different types of influence pertaining to social networks, romantic partner, and individual as predictors of unprotected sex for homeless youth. Participants in this study were 20 female and 20 male, ranging from 13 – 23 years. Of the remaining ten articles transgender and LGB youth were not mentioned in any way. The intentional exclusion of LGBT youth from academic literature reiterates the point of default heterosexism when creating studies on homelessness. The systematic pervasiveness of transgender invisibility in a dominant heterosexual society perpetuates both heterosexism and stigma, not only in academic literature but also in social service agencies.

Of the 15 random samples of academic literature, two articles explicitly discuss homeless transgender youth. Shepard (2013) examines three case studies to answer the question "how have LGBTQ activists paved the way for both trans direct action and direct services?" (p. 110). Shepard first focused their attention on the work of transgender activist Sylvia Rivera and how her work influenced trans\* inclusive social action and the establishment of services catering to the needs of LGBT, in particular, the transgender community in different aspects including transgender specific services for homeless youth in New York City. Rivera's passion and activism was instrumental in the creation of a number of homeless transgender youth specific services and organizations. This included Sylvia's Place Shelter, which segued into New Alternatives, which provided basic services for LGBT youth, also in New York City. New Alternatives has created a secure environment for homeless transgender youth by "mirroring the population we're [they are] serving" (p. 103) by

having staff that, for the most part, have been homeless at one point in their lives and also some of the staff are transgender. Creating this inclusive space for transgender youth allows for them to have a sense of community, for most this is the first time they have experienced this.

Kate Barnhart, director and founder of New Alternatives, runs the organization using a harm reduction model. The premise in using this model is to build a partnership with transgender youth rather than using social control tactics by meeting youth where they are at as opposed to where societal expectations expect them to be. By utilizing a harm reduction model, services designed to aid this vulnerable population the emphasis is on staff/client trust building client autonomy and self-determination. Considering that trust is the "central ingredient to this model of care" (Shepard, 2013, p. 104) for youth providers who utilize a harm reduction model patience and understanding are a key component in the practice of trust building. In moving past a more traditional approach in homeless youth services that emphasizes paternalism by stressing "collaboration and partnership rather than social control" (Shepard, 2013, p. 104), New Alternatives delivers a respect for client autonomy and support engagement throughout their organization. Shepard has focused their study on services that work with and for homeless transgender youth by creating mutual respect, equality, and support for self-determination and autonomy. Serving youth through a harm reduction model has proven fruitful in a small number of organizations that implement this practice; however focused research on this model is limited.

Gattis (2009) addressed psychosocial problems associated with sexual minorities in the United States by reviewing empirical literature using ecological systems theory to address risk factors, barriers to care, and correlates to homelessness. In this context, sexual minorities are defined by UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center as "members of sexual orientations or who engage in sexual activities that are not part of the mainstream and to members of sex groups that do not fall into the majority categories of male or female" (Definition of Terms, n.d.). Gattis (2009) conducted a review of studies comparing homeless sexual minorities and homeless non-sexual minorities. It is an important factor in understanding the specific needs of homeless transgender youth to do these comparison studies considering the risk factors for transgender youth drastically differ from homeless heterosexual youth.

The needs of transgender youth also differ in comparison to the needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. Studies for these specific needs are few and far between, as Gattis (2009) points out. Most of the studies in Gattis' review were inclusive of homeless and non-homeless gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth and rarely, if at all, included transgender youth in their studies; both epidemiological and correlational studies were reviewed. Gattis' study specifically associates transgender youth in relation to risk factors as opposed to previously mentioned studies that explicitly exclude transgender youth from the discussion in the random sample of academic research included in my study. Methodological strengths and weaknesses of homeless sexual minority youths' academic literature were reviewed and critiqued by Gattis as well. A substantial limitation with research design of this at-risk population is noted in the fact that "studies are not designed to understand the underlying causes or casual pathways to homelessness" (Gattis, 2009, p. 1080).

One key issue in academic literature is in the context of measurement, with specific focus on definitions as a research guide. Specific and consistently used definitions of homelessness, sexual orientation, and associated terms is lacking as a standardized measurement in academic literature. Gattis expresses this concern: "most of the studies relied [rely] on self-identification, which allows for social reliability bias and systemic bias to become of increasing concern" (Gattis, 2009, p. 1083). Both Shepard (2013, p. 102) and Gattis (2009, p. 1090) support my argument by reiterating the exclusion in academic literature and the gap in services for homeless transgender youth. By excluding transgender youth from conversations around homelessness the cycle of oppression is being perpetuated within social service literature.

In response to the exclusion of homeless transgender youth in the above 13 articles in my sample, this exclusion may be suggestive of the lack of visibility in both the transgender population and homeless population. The aforementioned idea of invisibility is both political and societal in how many people view these two specific populations. Researchers are afforded the privilege of an academic platform to share knowledge of important social issues that plague this country. Unfortunately the search for such articles was futile at best and limited within the Social Service Abstract database. As I see it, in analyzing these articles, most of them could have easily included transgender youth in their studies. For example, Rosario, et al. (2012) and Gafsky. et al. (2011) both discuss risk factors of homeless lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth and how interventions need to be modified when compared to heterosexual youth. Homeless transgender youth would easily fit into these studies for they share similar experiences as homeless LGB youth. I feel that the authors of these two studies have reiterated my point that homeless transgender youth are invisible not only in U.S. society but also in academic research.

## **Discussion**

The current study examined academic literature on homeless self-identified transgender youth. This study explored the weaknesses of previous studies in how transgender youth are discussed in the literature. I used literature located in the Social Service database because it is designed for those who are either furthering their education to work in social services or are already working in social services. By doing a random search, I saw exactly where homeless youth studies are falling short, in particular for the transgender youth population. Given their increased risk of poverty and homelessness, transgender youth are in need of access to secure and respectful homeless services. Youth focused homeless services are designed to be a social safety net for those who need a secure place to access and attain support in getting back on their feet. Currently, transgender youth are left to struggle against substantial barriers without that needed safety net (Mottet & Ohle, 2006, p. 83-84). This study is necessary to draw attention to, and identifying, the specific needs and barriers of the homeless transgender youth community.

A key, and disappointing, discovery is that the majority of my samples focused on heterosexual or gender identity non-specific homeless youth, with only two articles discussing homeless LGBT youth. One of the two articles discusses the specific needs of transgender youth in accessing services and the lack of secure resources. Lacking access to research on the needs of this at-risk population I question the level of education being offered to students who are in social service fields now or in the future; what are they learning and how are they learning it? By focusing studies in academic literature that analyze causation of homelessness for transgender youth services and programs would support homeless youth organizations and social service workers in utilizing this information in the formation and implementation of transgender specific services. Consequently, accessibility has a greater potential to be more transgender inclusive and would likely result in a higher rate of successes in addressing the needs of this population.

While I understand the importance and need for specific research that focuses on homeless LGBTQ population as a whole, in order to better understand transgender youth and their particular needs when accessing homeless youth services, providers need access to more academic literature. Considering that accurate statistics concerning homeless transgender youth are unavailable, due largely in part to this population being studied under the LGBT umbrella as opposed to individual studies. A significant limitation in this area of research is that most of the current studies are not designed to understand the underlying pathways to homelessness. Transgender youth are at greater risk of being assaulted and experiencing harassment than homeless heterosexual youth, in creating studies specifically focused on this aspect studies would be far less limited in their numbers. A limited number of studies focus specifically on homelessness within the transgender youth population, it is my deepest belief that when the number of studies increase the number of adequately trained social service agencies and staff will grow. By deconstructing Western

heteronormative gender binary government and homeless youth agencies can/will have a more empathetic perspective of gender expression within agencies that serve the homeless LGBTQ youth community. This in turn will help to ensure a secure and inclusive environment in which these youth will be given the tools to end the perpetual cycle of homelessness.

I am adamant about the importance, and necessity, of systemic change within the foundations of social service organizations and explaining why the emphasis needs to happen for transgender youth. Meezan and Martin (2003) state, "The need for social work research on the transgender population is both significant and immediate, given the lack of appropriate services available to them" (p. 13). A specific focus for social service academics and organizations need to have an understanding of the effects that marginalization and discrimination have on the youth who utilize services. For the most part organizations are ill prepared to address the needs of transgender youth, which differ significantly to heterosexual youths' needs; serving the needs of homeless youth is not a one size fits all solution. Without adequate, and accurate, literature on these issues and experiences of individualized groups accessing secure service and shelters the perpetuation of youth homelessness is likely to be over-representative of the youth population in the United States as a whole. Giving special attention to the positive outcomes of a harm reduction model with homeless transgender youth those who work in the social service arena have the potential to acquire the skills to have a more positive and successful rate of transitioning homeless transgender youth off the streets and into mainstream society. This model and its' successes have all but excluded from academic literature as well.

I have noticed throughout this process that using specific academic databases to identify homeless transgender youth in research studies is limited at best and lacks inclusion of this vulnerable population. Identifying the specific needs of at-risk and vulnerable homeless populations is an important part of being able to apply a specific needs assessment when transgender youth access agencies. The consequences of excluding this population can be paramount for those youth who want/need to access services and have a well informed and empathic staff available to them. Without explicit knowledge and understanding of how this vulnerable population experiences victimization and discrimination because of their gender identity/expression the services they seek have the potential to perpetuate the negative experiences they are already experiencing on a daily basis. This in turn has great potential in leaving this population feeling like they have no sense of belonging and lack acceptance in program services and refuse to return. A lack of belonging may subsequently lead to transgender youth being isolated from their homeless peers and any prospective means of a support system, forcing them into the street economy in order to survive. It is of the utmost importance for social service providers to be informed with current concerns of this population, which will in turn allow for ongoing insight into the needs of transgender youth. Social Service students and providers will then be better equipped to address and meet the specific needs of transgender youth by offering access to unbiased and supportive information utilized through academic literature. This progression will be less likely to happen as long as this population remains excluded from the majority of academic literature.

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