
The Challenge of Tackling Intersecting Inequalities in Policy and Practice: Examining Intersectionality in LGBT Youth Homelessness

Catilin Saunders*

Executive Summary

This report examines the challenge of tackling intersecting inequalities in policy and practice, specifically regarding LGBT youth homelessness (those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etc). There is a dearth of research, law and policy that tackles LGBT homelessness, especially regarding how gender, race and sexuality can compound, increasing chances of homelessness. Furthermore, the challenge of tackling intersecting inequalities in policy and practice is understanding how intersecting disadvantage leads to complex situations, often not sufficiently targeted in policy, practice and law. Specifically, this report examines how sexuality, race and gender together can increase the likelihood of homelessness and adverse experiences while homeless, demonstrating a need for better targeted policy, law and practice.

Law and Policy Context

LGB individuals between age 16 and 25 are more likely than those who are not LGB to be homeless and this likelihood increases again for transgender and ethnic minority individuals.¹ These differences reflect the fact that LGBT individuals are not a homogenous group.² Rather, social inequalities such as race, sexuality and gender can

* Kent Law School, LLB with Honours Graduate, 2025. Email caitlinnsaunders@outlook.com

¹ Carin Tunåker, Trude Sundberg, Shiyu Yuan, et al., *There's No Place Like Home: Uncovering LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness in the UK* (AKT, March 2025) <https://www.akt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/akt-No-Place-Like-Home-Research-report-lgbt-youth-homelessness-2025.pdf> accessed 22 September 2025.

² Jama Shelton, 'Transgender Youth Homelessness: Understanding Programmatic Barriers Through the Lens of Cisgenderism' (2015) 59 *Child and Youth Services Review* 10-18.

compound and expose someone to further social disadvantage.³ This reflects the theory of ‘intersectionality.’ This is the concept that individuals can be discriminated against due to ‘discrete’ characteristics, such as race and sexuality, as well as through how such characteristics can interrelate; for instance, an LGBT person of colour can be discriminated against due to the interrelations of sexuality and race.⁴ However, there is a dearth of national research on this, as well as a lack of law, policy provisions and homelessness services.⁵

At present, law is failing LGBT youth. Recently, AKT, a charity that specialises in LGBT youth homelessness, published a report to this effect, in which it referred to three main kinds of homelessness.⁶ Rough sleeping involves occupying somewhere unfit for habitation.⁷ Secondly, hidden homelessness concerns homelessness which does not show on official statistics, often involving sofa-surfing, or sleeping with someone for shelter (known as survival sex).⁸ Lastly, there is statutory homelessness, which is where someone is regarded as homeless by their local authority,⁹ although often little help is provided to them if they do not fall into ‘priority need’ for accommodation – in other words, a family with children, domestic abuse victims, and other forms of vulnerability.¹⁰ Indeed, even if they would otherwise fall under priority need, coming out to an unaccepting family is sometimes seen as becoming ‘intentionally’ homeless, resulting in receiving less support by their local authority.¹¹ Thus, this shows how the law fails LGBT youth by not regarding their unique vulnerability and instead providing better protection for those who conform to the conventional family form.¹² Indeed, despite the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 creating ‘prevention’ duties, whereby local authorities

³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine’ (1989) 8 *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139-167.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Tunåker et al. (n 1).

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ John Ecker, ‘Queer, Young and Homeless: A Review of the Literature’ (2016) 37 *Child and Youth Services* 325-361.

⁸ Tunåker et al. (n 1).

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Housing Act 1996, s 189(1).

¹¹ Helen Carr, Adi Cooper, Edith England, et al., ‘Queer Utopias of Housing and Homelessness’ (2022) 40 *Housing Studies* 1585-1602.

¹² *ibid.*

must take steps to prevent homelessness, regardless of priority need, and provide ‘relief,’ which can mean finding accommodation, this has done little to mitigate LGBT homelessness.¹³

Policy is also failing LGBT youth. Contemporary policy mainly targets rough sleeping, as seen by the 2024 ‘End Rough Sleeping for Good’ campaign, which was implemented by the last government.¹⁴ Although this report drew attention to the disproportionate representation of LGBT homelessness and proposed policy to prevent this, including tailored support,¹⁵ in *practice*, this has not happened and LGBT individuals remain disproportionately homeless.¹⁶ Equally, the Homelessness Code of Guidance, which assists local authorities, does not mention LGBT individuals, although it emphasizes the importance of local authorities providing up-to-date advice to those who are or are at risk of homelessness, tailored to the needs of vulnerable populations.¹⁷ This lack of guidance means there is significant difference with how LGBT individuals are treated at local authority levels and within local authority policy.¹⁸ Thus, there is a dire need for targeted policy implementation which acknowledges the vulnerability of this population, including intersecting characteristics.¹⁹

Intersectionality: Leaving Home

Intersectionality means homelessness experiences are likely to be different, dependent on an individual’s ethnicity, gender etc, creating a unique challenge for policy, law and

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ GOV.UK, ‘End Rough Sleeping for Good’ (3 September 2022) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ending-rough-sleeping-for-good> accessed 22 September 2025.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Tunâker et al. (n 1).

¹⁷ GOV.UK, ‘Homeless Code of Guidance for Local Authorities’ (GOV.UK, 13 February 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities>> accessed 22 September 2025.

¹⁸ Carin Tunaker, Trude Sundberg, Shiyu Yuan, et al., *There’s No Place Like Home: Law and Policy Briefing and Recommendations* (AKT, March 2025) <https://www.akt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/LGBTQ-Youth-Homelessness-Law-and-Policy-Briefing-and-Recommendations-2025-to-upload-to-website.pdf> accessed 22 September 2025.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

practice, as social inequalities can compound in complex ways. Regardless, LGBT youth are more likely to be homeless, with specifically hidden homelessness being ‘twice as likely.’²⁰ This is primarily caused by family breakdown, whereby ‘coming out’ worsens existing conflict. For example, 77% of LGBT individuals thought that coming out was causally related to homelessness.²¹ LGBT youth are also often subject to abuse due to their identity.²² However, intersectionality means experiences manifest differently for individuals.

Young transgender individuals are more likely to experience homelessness than the general LGBT population, at 37% compared to 22% for cisgender individuals.²³ This reflects intersectionality as the majority of transpeople identify as non-heterosexual, meaning they suffer compounding disadvantage due to sexuality and gender identity.²⁴ Indeed, while family may be accepting of their sexuality, familial rejection was often because of gender identity.²⁵ Furthermore, it was frequently the desire to *transition* that resulted in homelessness, not their sexuality,²⁶ and they were often also subjected to abuse because of their gender identity.²⁷ However, significantly, domestic abuse perpetuated against transpeople is likely to be different than conventional understandings of abuse, as it is often related to rejection of their gender. For example, misgendering or regarding a transgender individual as mentally ill are specific examples of abuse in this

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ GOV.UK, ‘Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People’s Experience of Homelessness’ (27 September 2024) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lgbt-peoples-experiences-of-homelessness/lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-peoples-experiences-of-homelessness> accessed 22 September 2025.

²² Lindsey McCarthy and Sadie Parr, ‘Is LGBT Homelessness Different? Reviewing the Relationship between LGBT Identity and Homelessness’ (2022) 40 *Housing Studies* 1525-1544.

²³ Tunaker et al. (n 1).

²⁴ GOV.UK, ‘National LGBT Survey’ (3 July 2018) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-lgbt-survey-summary-report> accessed 22 September 2025.

²⁵ Tunaker et al. (n 1).

²⁶ Mitchell Sellers, ‘Absent Inclusion Policies: Problems Facing Homeless Transgender Youth’ (2018) 20 *Public Integrity* 625-639.

²⁷ Ibid.

context,²⁸ and is often why they choose to leave.²⁹ However, these iterations of abuse are often not understood by those who work in homelessness services, meaning transgender youth often do not get priority need.³⁰ This shows the challenge of intersecting inequalities, whereby someone's gender identity and sexuality can compound in ways not currently recognised in policy.

Secondly, young ethnic minority individuals are more likely to be homeless than the general LGBT population. In a recent study by AKT, over half of those studied within England and Wales were from ethnic minority backgrounds.³¹ Furthermore, LGBT individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds often experience a clash between their identity and their cultural background. This is because some ethnic cultures value a closeness to other family members, meaning that their LGBT identity could potentially lead to them being ostracised from their family community.³² Furthermore, there were also perceptions that someone having an LGBT identity within the family could be seen as undermining the community's wider 'sanctity,' which could again lead to potential isolation from family members.³³ Many cultures also promote conventional gender roles which emphasize the significance of masculinity, potentially leading to familial clashes when individuals are unable to meet these expectations, causing them to leave home.³⁴ Again, this shows the challenge of intersecting inequalities, whereby race and LGBT

²⁸ Michaela M Rogers, 'Exploring the Domestic Abuse Narrative of Trans and Non-Binary People and the Role of Cisgenderism in Identity Abuse, Misgendering and Pathologizing' (2021) 27 *Violence Against Women* 2187-2207.

²⁹ Edward McCann and Michael Brown, 'Homeless Experiences and Support Needs of Transgender People: A Systematic Review of the International Evidence' (2021) 29 *Journal of Nursing Management* 85-94.

³⁰ Edith England, "'You mean, my theoretical rights?'" Exploring Services Shortfalls and Administrative (in)Justice among Homeless Trans People' in Lee Gregory and Steve Iafrafi (eds), *Diversity and Welfare Provision: Tension and Discrimination in 21st Century Britain* (Policy Press 2024) 136-154, 145.

³¹ Tunaker et al. (n 1).

³² Jen Reck, 'Homeless Gay and Transgender Youth of Colour in San Francisco: "No One Likes Street Kids" - Even in the Castro' (2009) 6 *Journal of LGBT Youth* 223-242.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ H Daniel Castellanos, 'The Role of Institutional Placement, Family Conflict and Homosexuality in Homelessness Pathways Among Latino LGBT Youth in New York City' (2015) 63 *Journal of Homosexuality* 601-632.

identity can compound to create new forms of inequality which are currently not recognised in policy. There is a need for targeted policy that is implemented in practice.

Homelessness Experiences

Intersectionality also means that experiences while homeless are likely to be different, whereby due to compounding factors of race, gender and sexuality, they might undertake certain activities while homeless or regard some forms of homelessness as safer.

Generally, LGBT individuals are twice as likely to be hidden homeless, employing strategies such as sofa-surfing.³⁵ However, the scope of LGBT homelessness is often undermined by statistics, and so the rates may instead be far higher, especially for those with intersecting characteristics.³⁶

Firstly, as noted above, young transpeople are more likely to encounter homelessness than cisgender individuals, showing how non-heterosexual, transgender individuals often suffer from compounding disadvantage.³⁷ They are also more likely to engage in survival sex (having sex with strangers) to have a place to stay,³⁸ and are more likely to be subject to abuse while homeless.³⁹ Furthermore, transpeople often prioritise gender-affirming treatment and/or surgery (which helps bring their sense of self in better alignment with their physical appearance) which is often made challenging while homeless, as they do not have a stable address for hospital waiting lists, and moving between locations could mean having to start at the bottom of a waiting list somewhere else.⁴⁰ Again, this shows the challenge of intersecting inequalities in policy and practice, in which inequalities such

³⁵ Tunaker et al. (n 1).

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Shanna Kattari and Stephanie Begun, 'On the Margins of Marginalized: Transgender Homelessness and Survival Sex' (2017) 32 *Affilia: Feminist Inquiry in Social Work* 92-103.

³⁹ Elizabeth Watts, Sarah Johnsen and Filip Sosenko, 'Youth Homelessness in the UK: A Review for the OVO Foundation' (Heriot Watt University, 12 November 2015) <https://researchportal.hw.ac.uk/en/publications/youth-homelessness-in-the-uk-a-review-for-the-ovo-foundation> accessed 22 September 2025.

⁴⁰ Maria Zaccaro and Jonathan Fagg, 'Life on an NHS Transgender Waiting List', *BBC* (20 March 2024) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-68588724#:~:text=Waiting%20> accessed 22 September 2025.

as gender identity and sexuality can compound in ways not currently understood by policy.

LGBT youth of colour are also more likely to have adverse experiences while homeless. Firstly, they are more likely to lack a community to turn to while homeless. This is because they often face homophobia from their home communities, and likewise ‘racism from white gay communities’, reflected in the fact that potentially ‘gay-friendly’ neighbourhoods may show animosity towards ethnic minorities.⁴¹ This means that they are likely to be particularly vulnerable, given the fact that LGBT ethnic minorities are more likely to experience hate crime than their white peers.⁴² Perhaps because of this, ethnic individuals often do not feel safe sleeping rough and instead seek alternatives. Research has established that they are 50% more likely to experience hidden homelessness, such as through survival sex and all-night cafes.⁴³ Significantly, the likelihood of engaging in survival sex increases again for transpeople of colour - specifically four times for Black individuals - showing how compounding inequalities interact.⁴⁴

Homeless Services

Intersectionality also means that the experiences of LGBT individuals while trying to access services are also likely to be different, with particularly transgender and ethnic minority individuals more likely to struggle to find services tailored to their needs. Furthermore, there is a dearth of services that specifically cater to the LGBT population, compounded by a lack of understanding and feeling unsafe, meaning many prefer sleeping rough rather than sleeping in alternative options such as shelters.⁴⁵ Indeed, many

⁴¹ Reck (n 32).

⁴² Stonewall, ‘LGBT Facts and Figures’ <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/lgbtq-facts-and-figures> accessed 22 September 2025.

⁴³ Tunâker et al. (n 1).

⁴⁴ Kattari and Begun (n 38).

⁴⁵ Ecker (n 7).

homelessness services do not accommodate their needs, operating with a ‘functional exclusion’ of LGBT individuals, including transgender and ethnic minority individuals.⁴⁶

Transpeople are more likely to have adverse experiences while trying to access services. Significantly, and even if a service caters to the needs of LGB people, this does not mean that it will also be appropriate for transgender individuals.⁴⁷ This signifies intersectionality, as such a service could potentially affirm a person’s sexuality, but not their gender identity. Not only is there a lack of services that target transpeople,⁴⁸ but also a ‘lack of awareness’ of their issues,⁴⁹ coupled with the fact that they often feel uncomfortable accessing services and reluctant to stay in one place for long.⁵⁰ Their discomfort was primarily associated with the fact that services such as shelters catered to the needs of cisgender individuals⁵¹ – for instance, by separating areas based on sex, meaning they often felt alienated and unable to stay in the part that best corresponded with their sense of self.⁵² This was often also coupled with a misgendering of those who were transgender and seeing them as mentally ill.⁵³ Furthermore, it was also important to transgender individuals as to whether they ‘passed.’ This was because the potential ability to be perceived as cisgender often meant having a more positive experience at a shelter, whereas when transgender individuals were unable to pass this often led to discrimination and abuse and sometimes they had to leave the shelter.⁵⁴ Indeed, some homelessness services even encouraged individuals to conceal their gender identity, and they were also often discouraged from using services by friends.⁵⁵ Experiences were likely to be even worse for ethnic minorities and transwomen.⁵⁶ Thus, again, this shows

⁴⁶ England (n 30).

⁴⁷ Shelton (n 2).

⁴⁸ Deborah Coolhart and Maria T Brown, ‘The Need for Safe Spaces: Exploring the Experiences of Homelessness LGBT Youth in Shelters’ (2017) 82 *Child and Youth Services Review* 230-238.

⁴⁹ McCann and Brown (n 29).

⁵⁰ Shelton (n 2).

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Coolhart and Brown (n 48).

⁵³ Shelton (n 2).

⁵⁴ Stephanie Begun and Shanna Kattari, ‘Conforming for Survival: Association between Transgender Visual Conformity/Passing and Homelessness Experiences’ (2016) 28 *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 54-66.

⁵⁵ England (n 30).

⁵⁶ Sellers (n 26).

the need for tailored support for transgender individuals, which acknowledges rather than encourages the repression of their identity and mitigates their fears about accessing mainstream support,⁵⁷ as well as being able to provide more specific support, such as tailored advice about going through hormonal therapy and other changes.⁵⁸

Lastly, although there is little research on the experiences of ethnic minority LGBT individuals at homelessness services within the UK, international evidence suggests a disproportionate number of young LGBT men from ethnic minority backgrounds accessing shelters.⁵⁹ Again, there is a need to ensure that homelessness services are sensitive to their needs.⁶⁰ Significantly, some ethnic minority individuals, such as those from Black backgrounds, who may have always been in a family community, find it challenging to find support outside of this, and are unaware that LGBT-specific services exist, meaning there may be a need to show people such services exist.⁶¹

Recommendations

The disproportionate degree of LGBT homelessness demands changes to law, policy and practice which are responsive to their needs, including a recognition of intersectionality.⁶²

Law and Policy

⁵⁷ Shelton (n 2).

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Castellanos (n 34).

⁶⁰ Nissa Finney, 'Ethnic Inequalities and Homelessness in the UK' (Center for Homelessness Impact, December 2022) https://assets-global.website-files.com/59f07e67422cdf0001904c14/63e6476b4d417106be76eae5_CHI.Ethnic.Inequalities.homelessness.pdf accessed 22 September 2025.

⁶¹ Pooja Singh, 'Young, Black and Homeless: Observations from Centerpoint's Front Line' (CenterPoint, 11 October 2021) [Young, black and homeless: observations from Centrepoint's front line | Centrepoint](#) accessed 22 September 2025.

⁶² Carr et al. (n 11).

There is a need for better policy provisions for LGBT individuals, especially considering intersectionality, at a national and regional level, in accordance with the findings in this report.

- At a national level, this can be implemented through specific references to LGBT youth in the Homelessness Code of Guidance, in a way which emphasizes the significance of intersecting inequalities in this context.⁶³ This has been a persistent demand; it was also asked for in AKT's most recent report, arguing that explicit mentions of this population would allow local authorities to act in ways that are supportive of this vulnerable population.⁶⁴
- Transgender individuals need to be recognised as having a priority need. They are a significantly vulnerable population and are often targets of domestic abuse within the home. Accordingly, they should be recognised as having a priority need as a vulnerable group, or as victims of domestic abuse under the Housing Act 1996. This should be followed through in practice, in which there are understandings that domestic abuse against transpeople can manifest differently. Again, elevated risks of domestic abuse are seen consistently in research and these changes would allow for tailored support.
- This report has shown the specific needs of LGBT individuals, particularly those who are transgender and from ethnic minority backgrounds, who are exposed to compounding inequalities. Accordingly, the Government should create new policies which allocate funding for LGBT organisations specifically to mitigate this, ensuring that such services are also inclusive of ethnic minorities and transgender individuals, which has also been raised consistently as a solution to the over-representation of LGBT youth in the context of homelessness.⁶⁵
- Similarly, this should be followed through in local authority policy, in which new policies and strategies should be created that acknowledge the specific

⁶³ Tunâker et al. (n 18).

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

vulnerabilities of LGBT individuals.⁶⁶ Furthermore, this should also involve close working relationships with others in the LGBT sector, such as specific LGBT services, to ensure that LGBT needs are being met by those that work in the sector in practice, and a need for this has again been raised in recent research.⁶⁷

Better Data Collection

There is a dearth of data, not only for LGBT individuals, but also on the significance of intersectionality within this population.

- The Government needs to collect better data on LGBT homelessness, specifically considering how inequalities can intersect, such as race and gender identity. Such data would help to assess what measures should be taken in practice, or whether policy change will lead to practical difference.⁶⁸

Practice

- There is a need to ensure that these policies and legal changes are followed through in practice – in other words, a strict adherence to policy and law, both existing and any created after this report. Furthermore, the significance of policy and *practice* is especially significant here, as 'while promoting and strategizing inclusion is important, it does not ensure equality for trans people using homelessness services'.⁶⁹

Conclusion

The challenge of tackling intersecting inequalities in policy and practice is understanding how compounding disadvantage, such as race, gender and sexuality, interrelate, leading to complex situations often not sufficiently targeted in policy, practice and law. Specifically, this report has examined how inequalities can compound and increase the

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ England (n 30).

likelihood of and adverse experiences while experiencing homelessness, specifically for young LGBT individuals. There is a clear need for targeted policy, law and practice to mitigate this.