

## **Understanding homelessness and housing among LGBTQ+ people – where are we in 2024? (Editorial)**

FORMBY, Eleanor <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4137-6592>>, MATTHEWS, Peter <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2014-1241>> and TUNAKER, Carin <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0885-648X>>

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## **Understanding homelessness and housing among LGBTQ+ people – where are we in 2024? – Editorial**

**Professor Eleanor Formby**

**Professor Peter Matthews**

**Dr Carin Tunaker**

The genesis of this special issue of *Housing Studies* was back in 2021, as at that time we were three of the few scholars in the UK who had done research on homelessness among lesbians, gays, bisexual, trans and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) people. We were aware this was a growing area of research interest, but also one substantially overlooked in the existing mainstream housing studies literature, so we saw this as an opportune moment to bring together recent, global scholarship. As with most such endeavours, events have delayed us pulling together the special issue until this moment.

One of these events is very telling of the broader social context that frames this special issue. The paper by McCarthy and Parr in this special issue, was produced in relation to a piece of research commissioned in 2018 by the UK Government Equality Office, on LGBTQ+ homelessness in England. The Conservative minority administration, led by Prime Minister Theresa May, elected in April 2017, was committed to LGBTQ+ equality, continuing the shift to socially liberal policy under previous governments, promising to outlaw so-called conversion therapy, and make the processes for gender recognition simpler (Government Equalities Office 2018, Lawrence and Taylor 2020). Watchers of UK politics will know this government collapsed in the mire of Brexit. The Conservative party elected as its leader the populist Boris Johnson, who had used his platform as a columnist at a national newspaper to make openly homophobic and transphobic comments. His party won the election in December 2019, and the post of Women and Equalities Minister was then filled by a considerable number of appointees with transphobic views, often referred to as “gender critical”. As a result of this, the commissioned research on LGBTQ+ homelessness remained unpublished, despite repeated Freedom of Information requests made, until the new Labour government got through the backlog of unpublished research reports in September 2024, as this Editorial was being prepared (Government Equalities Office 2024).

In a microcosm, this story reflects so much of what has happened in the world over the three years we have been developing this special issue. Globally, transphobia has become a dominant discourse. Driven by the Roman Catholic church and conservative Christian evangelicals in the US, a concerted attack on “gender ideology” has produced a virulent hatred of trans people, which in many contexts extends to a wider attack on all LGBTQ+ people, such as the “LGBTQ+ free areas” of Poland (see: Butler 2024). From what we thought was the benign, progressive environment in the UK (see Tunaker 2023 for a critique), we look on in shock as states around the world enact legislation akin to our own Section 28 – banning the “promotion” of LGBTQ+ identities. Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 in the UK, banned the “promotion of homosexuality as an acceptable family life”. Its effect was to prevent local government from actions to tackle LGBTQ+ discrimination or provide wider support (Duggan 1994). When it was eventually repealed, in 2000 in Scotland and 2003 in the England and Wales, many LGBTQ+ people, and allies, thought it was symbolic of a tide towards greater social liberalism and acceptance – the declining significance of homophobia (McCormack 2012). Now we find this oppressive legislation recreated globally.

To quote Butler (2024: 17) at length:

“Stripping people of rights in the name of morality or the nation or a patriarchal wet dream belongs to the broader logic amplified by authoritarian nationalism...the resulting authoritarian restrictions on freedom abound, whether through establishing “LGBT-free zones” in Poland or strangling progressive educational curricula in Florida that address freedom and sexuality and sex education.”

This paints an incredibly negative picture of growing discrimination and hatred towards LGBTQ+ people across the globe. And yet, there is a much more positive story as well. In 2021, for the first time, the UK census asked voluntary questions on sexual identity and gender identity (Guyan 2022). It found around three per cent of the population identify as non-heterosexual, that is lesbian, gay or bisexual. Just under half of one per cent identify as trans, that is not cisgender. Within these population-level figures though, we also see a clear demographic trend with far greater numbers of younger people expressing their identities as LGBTQ+ people. For example, the Census in England and Wales in 2021 showed that six per cent of people under-25 in England and Wales now identify as not heterosexual (Office for National Statistics 2023b, Office for National Statistics 2023a). So, despite a broader climate that seems to be turning against LGBTQ+ people, more people choose to express their diverse sexual and gender identities, despite the challenges this may bring.

While this is the context for understanding the social and political worlds of LGBTQ+ people and communities, we also have to reflect more broadly on the housing and homelessness situation. Of course, housing systems and homelessness policies and law varies wildly between, and even within, countries. While there is this local variability, it is framed by a shared global context where housing has become increasingly financialised. This has resulted in regional variability with acute housing shortages in some places, with problems of de-population elsewhere. More broadly there are vast inequalities in housing, with non-subsidised housing being out-of-reach for many, whether owned or rented. Groups with additional vulnerabilities are also more affected by housing shortages, as widespread discrimination dominates privately rented accommodation in markets where owners of property hold unlimited power to regulate access. The governing logics of neoliberalism mean that even in housing regimes that were decommodified (such as the Nordic welfare states) state intervention to deliver affordable housing is becoming more limited.

The result is a growing crisis of homelessness, primarily understood in popular discourse as multiple, complex needs rough sleeping. Broadening our definitions of homelessness (for example the UK statutory definition, or the FEANTSA typology) the problem understood as people not being able to have their housing needs adequately met, or experiencing extreme housing precarity. With this framing of the policy problem, we can see that we are experiencing a housing crisis. The root causes of this crisis are quite material and structural – large numbers of people do not have the financial resources to adequately meet their housing needs (Bramley and Fitzpatrick 2018). And thus, the impacts of the housing crisis map onto wider socio-economic inequalities. Those most vulnerable to homelessness are younger people; disabled people, neuro-diverse people and those with mental health problems; people of colour; and of course LGBTQ+ people.

Despite there being broad, structural causes behind the current crises of housing across different states, policy debates focus on the supposed complexity of an issue that is so often actually an issue of low incomes and insufficient housing (ibid.). Policy framing subsequently focuses on the most extreme homelessness situations, for example people who use drugs and who have no shelter, rather than a more mundane reality of people struggling to get by finding themselves in situations such as sofa-surfing or moving intermittently between various housing situations,

rooflessness and precarity. We then find ourselves returning to othering people who experience homelessness and understanding the problem as one of agency and personal failing. The policy solutions therefore also become personalised, without recognising broader contextual and structural issues. For example, Housing First, which began as a way of offering peripatetic support to vulnerable homeless people in New York, offering them housing unconditionally, has become a global “fast policy”, seen as a quick-fix to homelessness (see, for example: Anderson 2019). Finland is touted as having “solved” the problem of homelessness just by giving people a home. The ignores that most people experiencing homelessness do not have the complex needs supported by Finland’s support accommodation model of Housing First, and that in many contexts globally, there is simply insufficient quality affordable housing to provide everyone with a home.

Without pre-figuring the contents of this special issue, we can consider how LGBTQ+ people might be particularly impacted by these inequalities. Early research on LGBTQ+ homelessness among young people identified rejection by the biological family as a key pathway into homelessness. This research also highlighted the important role of queer “families of choice” and the LGBTQ+ community in supporting homeless young people (Valentine, Skelton et al. 2003). In many non-LGBTQ+ friendly contexts, this is undoubtedly still a major pathway into homelessness for young people. We also need to acknowledge the limited early research that also revealed the systematic exclusion of LGBTQ+ people from routes into housing, particular through owner-occupation, for example women (and thus lesbians and bisexual women) were routinely prevented from getting mortgages without a male signatory in many jurisdictions; single men could also be subject to discrimination by mortgage lenders (Doan and Higgins 2011). The years of the HIV/AIDS crisis put owner-occupation out-of-reach of many gay men, particularly in the UK, as insurers refused to provide the life insurance needed to purchase many mortgage products (Matthews, Barnett et al. 2024).

This might suggest a somewhat historic picture of structural discrimination affecting LGBTQ+ which meant they were excluded from housing. However, recent analysis does suggest that such inequalities have persisted in the UK, at least (Ibid.). Also, as already mentioned, the LGBTQ+ population has a much younger age profile. Therefore, the economic inequalities that put affordable housing out-of-reach of many young people particularly impact LGBTQ+ people at a population-level. Overall, then, this suggests a structural context where LGBTQ+ people are likely to be at greater risk of homelessness. Within this socio-economic context, policies then assume that mainstream routes to support homeless people into secure housing are appropriate for LGBTQ+ people. However, very basic issues, such as the prevalence of religious organisations in homelessness support, creating unwelcome environments; the norm to gender-segregate temporary hostel accommodation creating incredibly high risks for trans people; and the location of much social housing isolated from queer communities, all mean that support out of homelessness might not be appropriate for LGBTQ+ people (England 2021).

Because of this situation, we see LGBTQ+ homelessness being recognised as a very specific, and different phenomenon in a number of different contexts, and a growing international research base on LGBTQ+ homelessness. In this special issue of *Housing Studies* we bring together a small selection of this academic research.

We begin the special issue with the review of existing evidence by McCarthy and Parr. Looking across the international evidence on LGBTQ+ homelessness, they find consistent evidence that LGBTQ+ people are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness. As with all areas of homelessness research, an empirical and theoretical challenge is understand the *causes* of

homelessness (Somerville 2013). Similarly, this review of existing evidence points to the need to properly explore how and why LGBTQ+ people become homeless. While narratives such as familial rejection, as outlined in this editorial, provide simple ways of understanding how LGBTQ+ homelessness may come about, the reality seems much more complex, particularly in contexts where societal attitudes are more socially progressive.

The next paper, by Quilty and Norris, provides an example of a study that teases out evidence and theorisation on the causes of homelessness among LGBTQ+ youth, and how it can be alleviated, this time with evidence from Ireland. They use Clapham's (2005) housing pathway's approach, which seeks to move away from approaches to housing which solely focus on the economic and structural, or the micro and agentic, using a social-constructivist approach to bring both to the fore, with a recognition of wider socio-structural contexts. Using the narratives of their LGBTQ+ participants allows Quilty and Norris to "queer" housing pathways, revealing the different temporalities of LGBTQ+ youth compared to heteronormative time; different forms of kinship and support; and different liminalities and categorisations. The paper thus makes an important contribution to the theorisation of homelessness, housing pathways and LGBTQ+ homelessness.

In her book *Why Europe Is Lesbian and Gay Friendly (and Why America Never Will Be)*, Angelia Wilson (2014) argued that the structures of welfare states relate to whether countries are LGBTQ+ friendly. Put simply, being out as LGBTQ+ puts people at risk of familial rejection. Therefore, higher levels of decommodification in welfare states and less reliance on the family for basic welfare, means it is easier for people to be themselves. The welfare state offers a realm of protection to LGBTQ+ people from wider social harm. This means that comparative social policy, and housing studies, is important in understanding the role of the welfare state in ameliorating or preventing LGBTQ+ homelessness.

The paper by Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou et.al. contributes a Greek perspective on this, Greece being a very typical Southern European welfare state, with high levels of commodification and reliance on the family within its welfare regime. Further, the economic crash in Greece after 2008 was especially harsh, with exceptionally high levels of youth unemployment. As the paper reveals though, LGBTQ+ youth had particular pathways through homelessness and housing precarity through this period. While many had to rely on their families, and the "homo/transphobic imaginaries", there were also informal networks of support to respond to the almost complete lack of support from the state.

This paper brings us on to consider what we might do to alleviate homelessness among LGBTQ+ people. Our next paper by England explores community-led support to trans people. While we can include trans people within the LGBTQ+ "umbrella" it is important to recognise those who have trans identities are likely to experience different challenges to issues pertaining to sexual identity. And, as we have discussed, as a minority population they are subject to particular discrimination and vitriol in public discourse at the moment. They are also a group who are traditionally excluded and under-served by homelessness support services. As noted in this editorial, and the contributions to the special issue, community and other forms of kinship (chosen families) have historically been very important for LGBTQ+ people in preventing or alleviating homelessness. It is in this tradition that the utopian activism in Wales, explored in England's paper sits.

Our next contribution by Matthews et.al. continues this focus on "solutions" but moves our attention to statutory, or state-led alleviation of homelessness, and what we can learn from practice. Using a comparative approach to understanding homelessness legislation in the UK,

the paper highlights how homelessness legislation can be indirectly discriminatory, or supportive, of LGBTQ+ people depending on how it envisages the “home” and whether this is imbued with heteronormative understandings of home, household and family. This suggests the legislative framework in Scotland is better for LGBTQ+ people. Elsewhere in the UK, the broad housing rights in homeless legislation are only available for those with “priority need” which tends to prioritise limited housing for households with children. In 2013 “priority need” was abolished in Scotland, meaning single people had the same rights to housing as households with children; as LGBTQ+ are more likely to be single, and less likely to have children, this change benefited them. The paper then uses the case study of a local authority in Greater London to show how a policy focus on LGBTQ+ inclusion in homelessness services can lead to radical change in service provision and support.

The tenor of this editorial, and the articles we have summarised, might suggest that we easily know what the problem of LGBTQ+ homelessness is, and how we can best understand it. The reality is that the methodological and ethical challenges abound when trying to research LGBTQ+ homelessness. As with all research with people experiencing homelessness, many candidates for participation do not see themselves as homeless, or feel ashamed of their homelessness. Similarly, people may wish to conceal their LGBTQ+ identity, or be coming to terms with it themselves as they experience a transition through homelessness. With this in mind, our final paper by Tunaker et.al. considers these methodological challenges, drawing on experience from three very different researchers in three different geographical locations, that explored a range of approaches to engaging LGBTQ+ populations with their research.

In conclusion, it is an increasingly difficult time to be LGBTQ+, yet we also see hope and social change occurring, with young LGBTQ+ people resisting oppression and discrimination to be themselves. Formal and informal networks of LGBTQ+ activists are strengthening and forming anew to support people and tackle discriminatory policy and legislation. Similarly, the broad focus on homelessness, and the housing crisis within political discourse, in a number of different countries, does provide hope for concerted efforts to tackle homelessness. We hope this special issue provides a base for the growing scholarship on LGBTQ+ homelessness to provide the evidence to ensure LGBTQ+ homelessness is prevented as far as possible.

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