

# Prioritizing the Mental Health and Service Needs of 2SLGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness During COVID-19

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## What is our research about?

Our research sought to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. Utilizing a mixed-methods convergent parallel design, 92 youth completed virtual surveys and 47 individuals (youth and frontline staff and management from youth serving organizations) participated in virtual one-on-one interviews. All participants were from the Greater Toronto Area and surrounding areas.

## How did COVID-19 impact 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness?

2SLGBTQ+ youth reported higher rates of mental health and substance use issues since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to various reasons, including economic and service impacts (e.g., lay-offs), being forced to isolate with unsupportive or abusive family, limited access to health and social services, and losing access to safe community spaces and supports. Moreover, people with a recent history of homelessness are significantly more likely to contract COVID-19 and experience worse health outcomes compared to the general public, due to a higher burden of comorbidities and systemic health inequities.

## Why take action?

During and after the 3rd wave of the pandemic, younger people made up the largest number of growing COVID-19 cases. This is especially concerning for some of the most marginalized youth who face additional risks and barriers associated with the pandemic. Healthcare, social supports, and housing programs have been largely inequitable and inaccessible to 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness during the pandemic, despite increased rates of mental health and substance use issues. 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive and trauma-informed public services and housing programs must be prioritized in order to appropriately address the mental health needs and well-being among 2SLGBTQ+ youth during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

**Based on:** The Impacts Of COVID-19 On LGBTQ2S Youth At-Risk Of, And Experiencing, Homelessness

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## Action Area #1: 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive and trauma-informed service provision

### *In response to...*

- Youth experiencing homelessness reported high rates of poor mental health, self-harm, suicidality, and increased alcohol and substance use during the pandemic.
- Many services, including specialized healthcare clinics, social services, and housing programs previously available to 2SLGBTQ+ youth offered limited support during the pandemic, increasing wait-times and decreasing frequency and level of support received.
- Virtual care increased privacy concerns, particularly for those living at home with unsupportive families, and increased inequitable access for folks without reliable internet and/or devices.

### **Ways forward:**

- Efforts are required to ensure that services are more accessible to youth experiencing homelessness and to those unable to access services virtually.
- There is an urgent need for preventive and long-term 2SLGBTQ+ specialized mental health support and treatment, in addition to emergency/crisis services.
- Ensure that mental health services are 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive and affirming by training and educating all staff on the lived realities and needs of this population, and increasing 2SLGBTQ+ representation among staff.

## Action Area #2: 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive housing programs

### *In response to...*

- There was a significant rise in 2SLGBTQ+ youth living in shelters, transitional housing programs, group homes, and public spaces since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Congregate living settings have made it difficult to follow public health guidelines.
- Rigid rules within housing programs resulted in decreased accessibility (e.g., restricting outside social interactions, including seeing loved ones and going to work).

### **Ways forward:**

- Ensure that housing programs are 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive, affirming, and trauma-informed by creating a standardized model of care and service delivery across shelter and housing systems (standardized intake process, including questions regarding chosen name and pronouns; respecting and accepting each clients' chosen name and pronouns; equip services with 2SLGBTQ+ resources, all-gender washrooms, and support obtaining legal name change and ID).
- Provide options for residents to have social bubbles while living in shelters to encourage social connection, improve wellbeing, and decrease isolation and loneliness.
- Provide support and resources for shelter staff to improve well-being and decrease stress and burnout, so that they are best prepared to optimally support youth throughout the pandemic.
- Expand mandatory staff training focused on all aspects of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive and affirming care, built on the needs and lived experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ youth.