

THE RISK OF HOMELESSNESS FOR THE LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY IN POLAND

The public recognition, articulation, and understanding of LGBTQIA+ issues, including homelessness, in Poland is in its relative infancy. To fill this gap Elżbieta Szadura-Urbanska conducted research into the state of LGBTQIA+ homelessness in Poland. Building on this research, Szadura-Urbanska examines challenges such as stigma and discrimination in housing services, and their potential solutions (e.g., training flats). They convey a hopeful future for LGBTQIA+ persons experiencing homelessness in Poland, following the increase in awareness and local actions.



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Twenty-fifteen people saw the inauguration of the first hostel specifically catering to LGBTQIA+ individuals in Warsaw, financed by the Stefan Batory Foundation. Five years on, although such places have been created in several other cities, the number of services available is not enough to meet the demand.

Public awareness regarding homelessness among the LGBTQIA+ community in Poland is minimal, primarily based on the experiences of housing assistance organisations and institutions. These sources indicate that LGBTQIA+ individuals are particularly susceptible to housing instability. Additionally, there are concerns about accommodating non-binary, transgender, or intersex individuals among others, due to a lack of understanding among social workers about intersectionality and its implications, thus exacerbating exclusion within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Although there is currently no significant national-level action to address homelessness among the LGBTQIA+ community in Poland, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local governments are actively involved in this area. Local governments, in particular, have shown strong support for LGBTQIA+ individuals at risk of homelessness, with the appointment of representatives for equal treatment and the introduction of campaigns advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights in many of Poland's largest cities. Initiatives such as the 'Framework for Equal Treatment' in Gdańsk, the 'LGBT+ Declaration' in Warsaw, the

'Wrocław Declaration of Tolerance and Respect for Human Rights,' and 'Rainbow Krakow' are just a few examples of programs specifically aimed at the LGBTQIA+ community.

In pursuit of exploring this topic further, we conducted interviews with individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, as well as social workers, decision-makers in NGOs and officials responsible for local policies. The study was carried out on behalf of the National Federation for Homeless People, and its findings contribute a new perspective to the ongoing discussion on homelessness in Poland. Furthermore, the frameworks adopted were based on the 2021 research published by the Frontline Team in Fife, Scotland, supervised by Dr Briega Nugent.

According to the conducted interviews, the majority of LGBTQIA+ individuals facing housing difficulties mentioned two primary causes which occurred at different stages in their lives. Firstly, during early adulthood when they were still financially dependent, conflict with their families resulting from coming out as LGBTQIA+ had a direct impact on their housing situation. Secondly, many participants noted that their sexual orientation or gender identity negatively impacted their job security and financial stability, which further exacerbated their housing instability.

Participants in the interviews also mentioned addiction, mental illness, or incarceration as causes of their homelessness. Many of those we surveyed expressed scepticism over, or outright refuted, the effectiveness of help provided by institutions and organisations. They often experienced disregard, indifference, and oppressive rules from institution employees. Some felt that the employees were helpless in providing advice to those threatened with homelessness or already homeless and were unsure of where to send them or what permanent

addresses to indicate. However, respondents welcomed emerging initiatives, such as restaurants, cafes, and other public places labelled “LGBT-friendly” or “gay-friendly”, the actions of local governments, the appointment of equality representatives, and the emergence of new places across Poland where fundamental needs can be met.

In 2019, Kosma Kołodziej conducted research on a sample of nearly 500 LGBTQIA+ individuals up to the age of 25, which confirmed that episodes of homelessness often occurred after individuals disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity. Unfortunately, it is a common practice to kick out young people who identify as LGBTQIA+. The report ‘Social Situation of LGBTIA People in Poland,’ prepared by the Campaign Against Homophobia and Lambda, shows that 16.5% of the surveyed individuals from this community have experienced at least one episode of homelessness, with being thrown out of the house

or running away due to family conflicts as common reasons. Trans people are at particular risk of being evicted from their family homes and, subsequently, becoming homeless.

According to our study, employees of institutions working with homeless people have limited knowledge of the needs of the LGBTIAQ+ community. The survey results indicate that only about 43% of respondents have provided support to bisexual and homosexual people, and an even smaller group of about 23% have provided support to transgender people. While most employees claim to have no issues providing assistance to the first group, more than 59% of them would feel uncomfortable assisting transgender individuals. In general, 62% of employees do not know where to direct LGBT+ people to receive adequate support, and almost 75% of respondents expect training in this area.

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As of now, there are approximately seventy NGOs in Poland providing support to LGBTQIA+ individuals, with a significant number located in smaller cities and towns, such as Piła or Konin. Some of these organisations offer housing assistance specifically for transgender and non-heterosexual individuals, typically through hostels and transitional training flats. In response to the ongoing war in Ukraine, some of these organisations have also started accepting refugees.

Representatives from these NGOs highlight the particularly challenging situation faced by transgender and non-binary individuals seeking access to shelters. The difficulties begin with the admission process for low-threshold assistance facilities, such as night shelters, where placement must be consistent with the gender recorded on official documents.

Would better access to housing be a good solution? Considerably so - both in the form of housing programmes aimed directly at the LGBTQIA+ community, and general access. Transition training flats can usually accommodate a few people and, as our interviewees noted, they are primarily used by young people. The greater availability of these flats for LGBTQIA+ people up to the age of 25 or 29 is due to the availability that NGOs have. The emphasis on the young is simply due to market needs. One of the charities, which runs training flats for young people in general, claims that young LGBTQIA+ individuals constitute almost 50% of the applicants.

What about the housing needs of the LGBTQIA+ elderly then? It appears that such people are almost invisible within the system. There are no special programs targeting them specifically, and even if they are given a chance at being placed into the above-mentioned training flats, they may easily become targets for harassment and violence. According to our research, the optimal solution for elderly LGBTQIA+ individuals would be a housing scheme similar to the Housing First scheme, which has been recently implemented across several Polish cities.

Those running the organisations see the need for LGBTQIA+ people in the crisis of homelessness to use support tools other than just housing assistance. They also recognise the difficulties in doing so. Both on the part of LGBTQIA+ people, who are not always willing to take advantage of the free consultations with a psychologist, therapist, or vocational counsellor available in various projects, and on the part of professionals. Not all professionals are prepared to accommodate the needs of LGBTQIA+ people and not all of them speak an inclusive language. Furthermore, it appears that within large organisations that are open to everyone in need, this problem is not strongly recognised; the overtone of statements by decision-makers in these organisations leads one to conclude that it is enough to just be tolerant of differences in order to help effectively. While representatives of NGOs specialising in helping LGBTQIA+ people argue that there is no effective help without recognising the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

It has only been in the last few years that the articulation of the needs within the LGBTQIA+ community, including those facing homelessness, has appeared in the social discourse. Therefore, most cities are in the early stages of creating, implementing, and managing projects specifically targeting LGBTQIA+ people. For example, the first edition of Warsaw's pilot on 'Organising a 24-hour shelter and intervention centre for people of different sexual identities in the form of transition training flats' will end this year.

In turn, the practices of the LGBTQIA+ youth intervention housing project implemented by the Gdańsk Foundation will contribute to the development of standards for LGBT+ friendly services. Guidance for the conduct of housing support for LGBT+ is also to be expected this year following the evaluation of the 'Gdańsk Social Housing Programme'. The Poznan initiative (implemented with city funds) on housing schemes for LGBT+ people experiencing violence also demonstrates an intersectional understanding.

Lastly, it should be noted that LGBTQIA+ individuals themselves have noticed positive changes in terms of accessing accommodation. Another important aspect is the role of the media, particularly those outlets that are supportive of the LGBTQIA+ community. In June 2022, there were a remarkable 700 pieces of content related to this community, which represents a 200% increase from the previous month. Although June is a significant month for LGBTQIA+, which may have resulted in greater interest in the topic, our interviewees suggest that they find the media, especially the internet, to be a valuable source of information on shelters and other useful resources.