

WHAT IMPACT HAS COVID HAD ON THE LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE FACING HOMELESSNESS IN THE UK?

LGBTQ+ youths, who are over-represented among the homeless population, have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Akt are a charity who support LGBTQ+ young people facing homelessness, and have witnessed first-hand the negative effect that lockdown has had on this group, as well as the barriers they face in accessing supports. Tim Sigsworth outlines how akt have adapted their services to suit the needs of LGBTQ+ homeless young people, and how local authorities can do the same.



By **Bex Shorunke**, Senior Media Officer, akt charity, UK

BACKGROUND

The calamitous impact COVID-19 has had on the U.K. is such that we will continue to feel its aftershock in years to come. The pandemic has caused significant loss of life and livelihood. The lockdown restrictions that were introduced in March, whilst necessary to control the virus, have caused widespread negative economic consequences, exacerbated health inequalities, overturned daily life and deteriorated mental health and wellbeing.

Unemployment has skyrocketed as a result of businesses being forced to shut during lockdown. The government response saw loans set up to keep businesses afloat and employees enrolled into a 'Furlough scheme', meaning 80% of their wages would be state subsidized until October 2020. Despite this, many businesses have had to close, staff have been laid off and unemployment continues to haunt the nation.

The homelessness sector has been one of the worst hit by COVID. National youth homelessness helplines have reported a doubling in calls¹ during the lockdown with many young people trapped in abusive households. Rough sleepers who were swept up into temporary accommodation amid the government's 'Everybody In' directive are now having to leave the hotels and hostels that initially housed them. Those without employment who were in rent arrears during lockdown now face a rent debt crisis, foreshadowed by the lift of the eviction ban at the end of September. Consequently, homelessness is set to treble in 2020.

¹ <https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/Policy%20Briefing%20-%20Youth%20COVID-19%20final-2.pdf>

LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE AND HOMELESSNESS

Akt is a U.K charity supporting LGBTQ+ young people aged 16-25 who are facing homelessness, familial rejection or living in a hostile environment. We provide emergency accommodation (via our Purple Door scheme), host programmes, housing support and assistance with independent living.

One quarter of young people who are facing homelessness in the U.K identify as LGBTQ+, meaning they are overrepresented within this demographic. This can be attributed to the additional hurdles LGBTQ+ young people face when growing up; namely, homophobia and transphobia in the household. 77% of the young people we support cite familial rejection as the main factor for their homelessness.



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Homeless LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to be mistreated and mishandled by local authorities, experience violence and discrimination and develop substance misuse issues. Therefore, akt bridges the gap between LGBTQ+ young people facing homelessness and housing authorities who lack the insight to properly support them.

IMPACT OF COVID ON LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE

Our research shows that one in ten parents would feel uncomfortable if their child came out as LGBTQ+ (2019 YouGov). With more than one in ten not wanting their child to bring home a same-sex partner. The U.K lockdown brought some of these homophobic sentiments into fruition. There was increased tension within families who were intolerant of their child's sexual orientation or gender identity and thus abusive, alongside heightened anxieties in young people feeling ostracised from their queer community and experiencing the strain

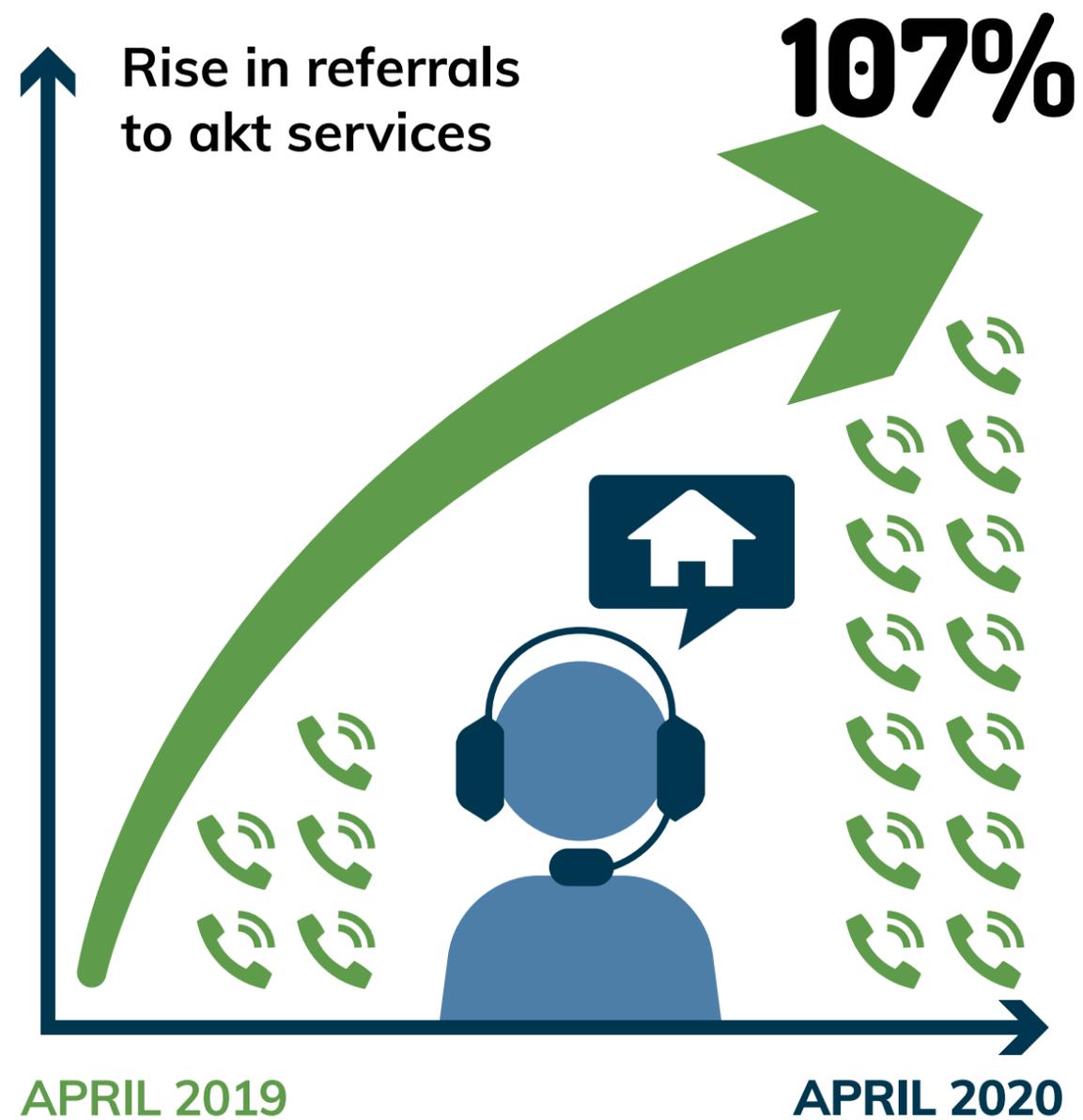
of having to hide their true self for fear of being 'outed'. The growing number of young people feeling compromised during lockdown translated into a rapid increase in referrals to akt services.

This April - the peak of Coronavirus- akt saw a sharp rise in referrals amounting to a 107% footfall increase in London compared with April last year, and approximately 37% increase across all our akt branches. Many of these referrals came from 16-18-year-olds living in hostile environments who had either been forcibly removed from their homes, or voluntarily left to escape abusive situations. Many were now presenting to akt as rough sleepers.

The implications for LGBTQ+ young people who find themselves homeless amid COVID are dangerous. Many are suffering with PTSD on account of the trauma experienced in homophobic and transphobic households. Additionally, the cancellations of Pride celebrations across the city (including U.K Black Pride and Muslim

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Pride) added salt to the wound. For many young people Pride is a lifeline that grants them the opportunity to express their gender identity and connect with an LGBTQ+ community they may not have access to at home.

This compounded with the erosion of and limited access to support networks usually present, and an ongoing shortage of viable accommodation options, makes for a young person in an increasingly desperate situation.

We are seeing young people across all genders and sexual orientations engaging in risk taking sexual behaviours as a means for survival. They are using dating websites to meet people and obtain a bed for the night or to connect with others outside their abusive homes. This exponentially increases their exposure to violence and sexual exploitation.

Another motivation for engaging in sexually risky behaviours is financial. The gig economy was hit hardest by COVID-19 in terms of jobs loss and risk of unemployment - many of our young people work within this realm. The back-payments for their rent are accumulating, and with many young people on license rather than tenancy agreements, they are at the mercy of their landlord. Subsequently they are being served postponed or no-fault evictions irrespective of the existing eviction ban. In these situations, with little knowledge of their financial rights, some young people are resorting to exploitative sex-for-rent arrangements.



LGBTQ+ ETHNIC MINORITIES

In the U.K ethnic minorities have been disproportionately impacted by the virus. This is in part due to health inequalities and greater exposure to the virus in frontline and key worker professions. Therefore, LGBTQ+ black and brown communities have suffered as a result. 68% of the young people accessing akt's services are black and people of colour (rising to 80% in London). They face intersectional barriers on account of their gender or sexual orientation *and* race.

Examples of this include LGBTQ+ young black men who are rough sleeping becoming targets of racialized prejudice. StreetLink requires rough sleepers to be in a fixed location to be helped, however as the police are continually moving these young men along, they are being prevented from accessing support.

This racism filters into the renting sector leading to housing insecurity among LGBTQ+ black and PoC folk. Lockdown has strained familial relationships so many young people are resorting to privately rented rooms for safe refuge. Young black men being discriminated against by renting agents based on their African surname is all too common. Similarly, the same demographic is being unfairly dismissed by prospective white housemates and renting agents on account of 'not being the right fit' - the racist overtones soon become apparent.

HOW ARE AKT ADAPTING TO SUPPORT LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE?

At the start of lockdown we launched our appeal #aktogether to galvanise support on social media and raise money for LGBTQ+ young people at high risk. This enabled us to provide accommodation to rough sleepers in need of safety, food and hygiene supplies or just a bike to get to work.

We digitised our services where possible. We created an online support hub as a safe space for young people to connect with each other and seek resources on mental wellbeing. We utilised our live-chat and set up an e-mentoring service offering advice on financial rights, seeking refuge and staying safe.

Twitter and Instagram were mobilised as platforms to push wellbeing-focused content, tips to navigate lockdown and online events, such as our #aktogether sessions - a two-day online extravaganza providing practical tips, Pride-themed Q&As and guest-featured Instagram Lives. All of which contributed to the 200 percent spike we've seen in young people visiting the site in the past twelve months.

LGBTQ+ young people facing homelessness are now dealing with the aftermath of COVID, severely strained familial relations, a rent-debt crisis, unemployment, imminent eviction and the mental and physical ramifications of lockdown. To cater to the increasing need for our services we've hired two new caseworkers for London, a digital caseworker and an Assistant Director of Services. However, in order to cultivate the infrastructure needed to sustainably support LGBTQ+ young people experiencing homelessness, local authorities need to do their part.



WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE?

Recognising hidden homelessness is paramount. Sofa surfing, hook-ups that supply a bed for the night and gay saunas (when they're open) all present themselves as viable options for a young person in search of shelter. Local authorities need to consider the transient nature of homelessness in order to adequately support young people's needs.

The vulnerabilities of this group; the tendency for charities like akt to be their first port of call; the likelihood they've left home and their community due to abuse; their transient behaviour when homeless, are factors that need consideration when establishing priority need. Likewise, taking heed of and monitoring the young person's sexual orientation and gender identity when they approach the local authority is important. This ensures their associated risks and requirements have been taken into consideration, and signals to LGBTQ+ communities

they are in a safe place. It also lets charities like akt know exactly how many LGBTQ+ people are facing homelessness; at present, we have no data on them as a specific group meaning we don't know the full scope of the situation and aren't able to help as much as we could.

Our final ask to authorities and housing providers is to listen to us. LGBTQ+ homelessness and abuse will not end without partnerships between local authorities and charities like akt. COVID has challenged the mechanics of our society, and with it, further inflamed the barriers already faced by LGBTQ+ young people. Akt takes this into account. We provide training and guidance to local authorities and housing providers which enable them to develop safe, bespoke and localised responses to LGBTQ+ youth homelessness. By working together, we can engage in prevention and early action to provide a service that is gender and race inclusive, and ultimately, end LGBTQ+ youth homelessness.

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