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The Role of Institutional Placement, Family Conflict, and Homosexuality in Homelessness Pathways Among Latino LGBT Youth in New York City

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Abstract

Despite the overrepresentation of LGBT youth among the homeless, the processes leading to their homelessness are understudied. This ethnographic study sought to elucidate the role of sexual orientation in the pathway to housing instability among young gay men. Fieldwork included eighteen months of participant observations in public spaces and at a homeless LGBT youth organization in New York City, as well as formal semi-structured interviews with 14 Latino young men and 5 staff.

Three distinct pathways emerged. Some youth became homeless after placement in state systems of care disrupted their social support systems while others after extreme family conflict over sexual orientation. Nonetheless, most youths became homeless as a result of long-term processes of family disintegration in which normative adolescent development and disclosure of homosexuality exacerbated pre-existing conflict. These findings suggest the need to examine the accumulation of risks before disclosure exacerbates family conflict and increases their risk of homelessness.

Keywords

Gay youth; disclosure; sexual orientation; Latino youth; risk factors; youth homelessness; family conflict; adolescent development; housing instability

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The disproportionate number of homeless LGBT youth constitutes both a service and a research priority. Over 1.5 million youths are homeless every year (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007), with sexual minority youth being over-represented in most geographic areas (e.g., Thompson, Maguin, & Pollio, 2003; Toro et al., 2007). The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless estimate that between 20% and 40% of all homeless youth identify as LGBT (Ray, 2006). To elucidate the role of sexual orientation in the pathway to housing instability, this ethnographic study examined the life experiences of 14 homeless young gay and bisexual Latino men living in New York City and solicited the perspectives of 5 staff serving them at an LGBT homeless youth organization.

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Regardless of sexual orientation, becoming homeless happens within difficult family and social environments. Family life pre-homelessness often consists of experiences of substance use within the family (Kral, Molnar, Booth, & Watters, 1997; MacLean, Embry, & Cauce, 1999), chronic conflict (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Rew, 2008), and neglect, abuse, and victimization (Rew, 2008; Tyler & Cauce, 2002). Family life also includes histories of parental prison convictions, dependency on public assistance, unemployment, and single-parent households (Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, Rice, Mallet, & Rosenthal, 2006; Toro et al., 2007). While these factors are associated with or contribute to homelessness among youth, including LGBT youth, the processes leading to the housing crisis are less understood (Dunne, Prendergast, & Telford, 2002; Lankenau, Clatts, Welle, Goldsamt, & Gwadz, 2005; Palenski & Launer, 1987; Paradise & Cauce, 2002).

Definitions of youth homelessness vary across institutions as well as studies. Categories have been developed to capture the broad range of circumstances leading to homelessness (runaways, throwaways), the variety of housing situations (street youth), or complex interactions with institutions (system kids, foster care youth). However, these categories are neither discrete nor homogeneous (Panter-Brick, 2002); homelessness situations among youth are fluid and change over short periods of time (Tyler, 2008). Existing categories are also inadequate representations of how youth see themselves (Toro et al., 2007). In this article, the term “homelessness” is used in its broadest meaning to capture study participants' perceived residential instability, vulnerability, and uncertainty, even while staying at home, living in foster care, or being a part of a housing program.

Despite the increased acceptance of gay individuals in the U.S., the remaining stigmatization still renders some gay youth homeless. Disclosure of sexual orientation is often cited as the chief cause of homelessness among LGBT youth (e.g., Ray, 2006; Toro et al., 2007). However, few studies have examined the family dynamics predating disclosure, adolescent development, systemization into child services, and the interaction of these factors with family conflict over sexual orientation to create housing vulnerability among LGBT youth (e.g., Nolan, 2006; Prendergast, Dunne, & Telford, 2001).

Methodology

Through extensive fieldwork and qualitative interviews with LGBT youth and their service providers, this ethnographic study sought to understand episodes of homelessness in the context of engagement with child welfare systems, persistent family conflict, homosexual awakening, disclosure of sexual orientation, participation in gay life, and engagement in housing services. This article presents findings related to the role of sexual orientation in different pathways to housing instability by examining narratives of family life during childhood and adolescence, the development and disclosure of a homosexual identity, and family conflict leading to departure from home. The study included a systematic review of research and practice-based literature; 18 months of intensive fieldwork in public spaces and at a community-based organization (CBO) serving LGBT homeless youth; in-depth semi-structured interviews with fourteen (14) Latino young men; and multiple interviews with 14 staff, five (5) of them semi-structured.

Site Selection

A community-based organization (CBO) in New York City serving homeless LGBT youth was selected in order to provide an opportunity for ethnographic fieldwork and consistent access to youth and staff. Additionally, the site's closeness to Christopher Street piers, an area where clients and other LGBT youth congregate, facilitated street fieldwork. The positive response of the management to the project allowed me to participate in the daily life of the organization, including attending staff meetings, conducting intakes and workshops for clients, and participating in outreach activities. An average of 16 hours a week was devoted to institutional fieldwork during the first 12 months of the project, and an average of 4 hours per week in the last six months of the study.

Sampling and Interviewing of Youth

In addition to informal field interviews with LGBT youth, fourteen (14) homeless Latino young men who self-identified as gay or bisexual were recruited through face-to-face interactions for in-depth interviews. Given the exploratory nature of the study, general purposeful sampling provided sufficient information to generate an initial outline of pathways to homelessness (Cresswell, 2003; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Morse, 2000). Later in the study, theoretical sampling helped determine recruitment needs and maximize the discovery and densification of emerging themes within these pathways (Corbin & Strauss, 1996). Out of the fourteen (14) youth interviewed, one respondent has been excluded from this analysis since he reported no family conflict as a reason for his presence at the housing program. He had lost his job and used the CBO as a transitional place until he was able to afford his own place again.

The first interview was conducted in October 2008 and the last one in February 2010. Interviews were conducted in private rooms, and respondents underwent the informed consent process approved by the IRB at Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. Youth received US$30 dollars as a token of appreciation, a referral list to social and health organizations, and a letter with information about the research team and the IRB. Interviews were conducted in English (11) or Spanish (3). Lasting between 60 to 90 minutes, interviews consisted mostly of open-ended questions on family relations, socioeconomic conditions, stigmatization and discrimination, coming out experiences, and housing stability. However, the interview questions depended on the specific personal history of the participant. Based on the analytical needs of the project, interviews with later participants included verification questions to seek youth's perspectives on emerging themes and reactions to initial findings.

The age of the youth interviewed ranged from 19 to 24 years of age. Most respondents were born in the US (10/14), with close to half of them born in NYC (6/14). Out of the 8 born outside New York, five (5) moved to NYC after becoming homeless. Respondents identified as Latino (9/14) or Black and Latino (5/14). The majority identified as gay (11) and three as bisexual. Their stories conveyed differences in family resources. Four (4) could be categorized as working class, three (3) middle-lower class, close to half middle class (6/14), and one upper class. Two youths had not finished high school; half of them had completed high school or GED; four had some college; and one had finished an associate's degree.

Sampling and Interviewing of Service Providers

In addition to providing a context for LGBT youth homelessness and helping with the recruitment of youth, the inclusion of staff provided opportunities for triangulating information, explicating observations, and commenting on findings. I conducted informal interviews with 14 staff and later selected five (5) among them for multiple semi-structured interviews. All five had supervisory responsibilities, college degrees, and programmatic experience. With approval from supervisors, staff provided verbal informed consent. Staff received no compensation for their participation. The interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes and included evaluative-type questions on clients and services, as well as reactions to analytical interpretations of the concurrent data analysis. Most questions were closely related to the role of staff as “key informants” in the ethnographic sense described by Bernard (2002). The first formal interview was conducted in May 2009 and the last one in February 2010. While their perspectives greatly informed the analytical process, staff's views have been reduced in this article to maintain the emphasis on youth's voices.

Data Analysis

Fieldwork notes, informal interviews with staff and youth, and transcripts of the semi-structured interviews with staff and youth were concurrently collected and analyzed in ATLAS.ti 5.0 throughout the project using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 1996). This approach sought to build, and regularly rebuild, an explanatory framework of housing instability among LGBT youth within which themes arising from the literature review and the primary data could maintain an ongoing dialogue. Specifically, the concurrency of data collection, data analysis, and literature review helped explore conceptual and theoretical issues and emerging themes with later respondents. Furthermore, the concurrency shaped the selection of potential interviewees and content of new field observations and interviews.

Rather than using open, axial, and selective coding in sequence, the coding type utilized at any given time depended on the stage of the research and the collection of new data. Open coding, a sentence-by-sentence analysis of field notes and interviews, was used for all of the transcripts, regardless of when the interviews had been conducted to ensure potential themes and nuances of meaning were captured. Axial coding was most commonly utilized in the early stages of the analysis. Specifically, patterns of homosexual awakening and disclosure, matrices of risk and protective factors, and typologies of housing instability experiences were developed utilizing the capability of ATLAS.ti for creating visual networks of categories, memos, and quotations.

Later in the project, selective coding was used for developing plausible explanations of homelessness. Semantic analysis, conducted trough the creation of families of codes, super-families, and analytical memos, helped with the development of conceptual categories, properties, and dimensions. The early development of conceptual categories and plausible pathways was particularly useful when conducting follow-up interviews with management staff in the last few months of the project.

Findings

Overall, LGBT youth homelessness was not merely the result of severe conflict over sexual orientation for most youths. While family reactions to disclosure varied from outright abuse to disapproval to full acceptance, over half (8/13) of the youths had left home even before disclosure of sexual orientation. Furthermore, most of them (10/13) had returned home even after disclosure of sexual orientation occurred, maintained family connections (10/13), and received financial support from their families (9/13) after leaving home. Nonetheless, sexual orientation played a role in exacerbating family conflict and creating housing instability among these youths.

Based on the youth's narratives of family life, coming out to themselves and others, and homelessness events, three main pathways to homelessness emerged. First, some young gay men were placed under the supervision of the state before disclosure of sexual orientation; upon leaving these settings, some returned home but family conflict restarted and precluded them from remaining there. In the second pathway, the participants were forced to leave or left home due to severe conflict over homosexuality, masculinity, and gender presentation. Most common was a third pathway where disclosure of sexual orientation exacerbated pre-existing family conflict resulting in youth leaving or being forced out. Organized according to these pathways to homelessness, Table 1 shows relevant family characteristics and events of the youth's life histories before, during, and after disclosure of sexual orientation. The actual names of the participants have been changed and some details have been omitted to protect their confidentiality.

The pathways to homelessness varied across respondents as shown in the table. The first group of youth (Sean, Julio, Walter, and Enzo) interacted early in their lives with state systems of care (i.e., child welfare and juvenile judicial system) before issues of sexual orientation emerged. Placed under protection of the state at an earlier age, Sean and Julio experienced emotional and physical distancing from their families and did not have a place to return to after leaving child welfare institutions. On the other hand, Walter and Enzo were able to return home for some time despite pre-existing conflict because they were placed later in systems of care and had built stronger family relations during their childhood.

Disclosure had a direct negative impact on the ability to remain home for the second group of youth (Felipe, Rafael, and Agustín). In the absence of engagement with state systems of care or severe family conflict prior to disclosure, the conflict consisted primarily of issues related to sexual orientation, masculinity, and gender presentation. Their first spell of homelessness happened after disclosure –the same day for one of them. Two of the youth had returned home after disclosure of sexual orientation but later left because of the reemergence of conflict.

Finally, the larger group consisted mostly of youths without previous engagement with state systems of care but with family conflict before disclosure. Conflict centered on a variety of issues, including parental complains about substance use, behavioral disorders, and lack of educational and employment goals. Most participants in this group left home before or around the time of disclosure of sexual orientation. While the family reaction to disclosure of sexual orientation varied, none of the youths were forced to leave immediately. All of these youths returned home despite their family's reactions to their homosexuality, received financial support, and remained in contact with their families. However, they felt they could not manage family conflict and eventually left home. A detailed examination of these three pathways follows.

Pathway 1: Placement Under the Supervision of the State Before Disclosure

Close to half of the youths (6/13) had a lifetime history of contact with child welfare agencies, foster care, or criminal justice institutions. However, four of them had left home before disclosure of sexual orientation to their families. While two of them were able to return home, the resurgence of pre-existing conflict prevented them from remaining there. Their stories illustrate how institutionalization shaped their paths into homelessness as well as their ability to reestablish meaningful family connections, which could have moderated their slippage into chronic homelessness.

Early systemization and family estrangement—Julio, 22, was born in Detroit, Michigan. Dominican and Colombian, he was slim and medium height. He seemed prone to melancholy and self-effacement in groups. At age 5, the police removed him and his 4 siblings from home because of their mother's severe mental illness and the high risk of severe physical abuse. Reporting over fifty placements, Julio experienced both caring and abusive family relations. His last placement lasted close to six years, providing him with a somewhat tenuous sense of stability. During this time, Julio had a sexual relationship with the 18-year old biological son of his foster parents.

Julio: There was no intercourse at all, never went that far. He used to kiss us [foster siblings] all the time. That he did in front of the family. Like, in front of everybody else, he used to kiss us all the time. I like – no one thought of anything. I never thought of anything. I thought, you know, it was the only time anybody ever gave a shit about me.

Although his story of the sexual encounters included language of victimization and psychological damage, his descriptions also included a nuanced narrative of sexual awakening, embedded in a yearning for affection and family belonging. Staying for a long time in one foster family provided Julio with some stability. However, the foster mother abused him physically and verbally and reminded him constantly of his condition as a foster child. Julio thought of running away many times, and at 16, he finally left.

Julio: I packed some things into a bag. I didn't know where I was going. I slept on the street. I was outside. I packed some things into a bag. I walked – because the street was better than being in that house.

Daniel: Why?

Julio: Because I got so sick of it. I got sick of getting slapped and knocked around and pushed into chairs and forced to stay up all night, beating after beating after beating, spit on, trash, arguments, yelling, screaming. I can't stand the confusion. I can't take the confusion. I can't take that. I walked out the door, and I said, "I'll shoot myself before I deal with this another night."

Long-term placement in foster care resulted in emotional and physical distancing from his biological family, preventing him from going back home or accessing resources. Having become aware of his sexual orientation, Julio moved across the country back and forth between youth and LGBT youth shelters for the previous 6 years. He was assaulted and harassed at shelters and in the streets for being gay. At the time of the interview, Julio was staying at a religious LGBT shelter and spent most of his time with other gay clients.

Sean, 23, Dominican and African American, was also placed in the youth system early on. At four, he was taken away because of his mother's substance abuse. But unlike Julio, he never experienced the severe instability resulting from a long list of foster placements. Perhaps because of his hearing disability and speech impairment, he was placed instead in group homes until age 18. After leaving the group homes, Sean envisioned going back to live with his biological mother and, in fact, moved to NYC where she and his older siblings were living. But his mother was still using drugs and not interested in reunification.

Sean: I was mad that my mom couldn't talk to me, couldn't call me. I would call her and she wouldn't call me. I write letters to her and nothing. Okay – it's hard for me. Right now, I am 23. I know where my mom is. I still see her, but we're not very close.

He saw his family sporadically, but he agonized over coming out to his family and losing his tenuous position within the family.

Sean: They're family, but if I'm going to be gay, I won't tell them because they won't like it. That's just them. I know my family. I am sure if I tell my family that I'm bisexual they won't be too happy about it. They're going to be pissed.

Ultimately, he felt isolated and alienated from his mother and siblings. Lacking a supportive family network, Sean ended up staying on and off at shelters, on the streets, and in rented rooms. Like Julio, Sean became exposed to the high risks of homelessness, which resulted in street victimization and HIV infection. The day of the interview he was waiting for case managers to help him gain access to HIV treatment and a place to stay for that night.

Julio and Sean were placed under state supervision early in childhood, effectively disrupting their sense of family belonging, increasing their assimilation as a youth in systems of care, and exposing them to street victimization and health risks. Their early placement severely damaged access to family networks and resources that could have prevented slippage into chronic homelessness once they left foster care or group homes.

Later systemization and retaining family networks and resources—Walter and Enzo were placed under the care of the state later in adolescence, at a group home and a juvenile detention center respectively. Because of their placement later in life, they were able to develop and maintain family connections and a sense of belonging. Albeit fragile and conflictive, these family ties allowed them to return home, even if for brief periods of time, and access family networks and resources. Walter, 22, was medium-built, with wavy hair and light skin. He spent his early childhood with his grandmother until his mother brought him to the US from the Dominican Republic. He met his father but had not seen him in 10 years. At 13 he was placed in custody of the state because of his mother's neglect and her boyfriend's physical abuse. Although Walter was aware of his sexual feelings for other boys since he was six, his process of gay identification coincided with his placement in foster care.

Walter: I always had a strong attraction towards guys, but I wasn't familiar with the word, with the term gay, with the label gay.

Daniel: When did that happen? When did you get familiar with it?

Walter: When I got into foster care. People would say, “Oh, you're gay. You're gay, you're so gay. You're a faggot this, queer that”.

While Walter encountered derogatory terms for his sexual desire, as well as physical harassment, he found opportunities for developing a gay identity and engaging in homosexual behavior. After turning 18, he returned to live with his mother.

> Walter: I went back to live with her, but that was really - I was too - how do you say - I didn't grow up with her. I wasn't used to her. I wasn't used to her style of… she would want to re-educate me, like I was a child, and I was eighteen years old. You can't try to discipline me at that age. When I grew up, I didn't grow up with her so that was kind of hard for me. I wouldn't listen, and I was too stubborn.

They had grown apart, and issues of authority, discipline, and behavior became the foci of family conflict. Although they did not have an straightforward conversation about his sexual orientation, the combination of her religious views on homosexuality and conflict over bringing men home led to ongoing conflict.

> Walter: When did I leave my house - in July, end of July, beginning of August, something like that. She has some issues because she was - she changed religions. She's a Mormon and she kind of - I don't know. She started acting differently… she gave me an ultimatum by the way, either I change who I was, who I am, or I got to leave her house. That's what I did. I wasn't going to change who I was. I wasn't going to stop liking boys. I wasn't going to stop having sex with boys.

While Walter felt his mother was attempting to undermine his independence and identity, his mother's mental illness also took a toll in his mental health. He suffered severe episodes of depression and hospitalization and felt that the best option was to leave.

> Walter: It's something about my mother, her depressiveness. Her presence, just being around her, it just shuts me down. It just brings me down. I don't know why. It always brings me down. When I'm with her, that's when I'm the worst. I'm depressed and don't want to deal with the world. I just want to stay in a little corner in my room, not having to deal with the world. That's not good. That's mainly the reason why I left my house.

Walter finished an associate's degree and, after three years living together, decided to go to an LGBT youth shelter.

Similarly, Enzo, 19, spent his childhood with his family. Born in NYC, he was light skinned, tall, slender, and good-looking. He displayed both soft manners and assertiveness. Enzo never met his father and grew up with his mother and stepfather. Overall, Enzo was very critical of their parental skills.

> Daniel: What kind of arguments did you have?
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> Enzo: “Mom, you need to clean the bathroom.” “Mom, your kids are hungry.” “Mom, you need to cook for your kids.” That's how we start the arguments because I tell her what to do.
>
> Daniel: And she…
>
> Enzo: Don't like that. My mother hates it. Her line is “It's my house. If you don't like it, you leave. I do whatever the fuck I want.” But she can't do that when she has kids. She fails to realize that.

Although he had disclosed his sexual orientation to his friends and an older gay brother, he had been reluctant to disclose to his mother since she slit her wrist and spent time in a psychiatric ward when his brother came out. After her return, the family conflict became more intense, and Enzo ended up leaving home at 13 with a small amount of cash. She accused him of credit card fraud, and he was placed in the juvenile system for 3 years. Albeit chaotic, his family ties allowed him to return home under probation. After six months, conflict reignited, and his mother accused him of breaking probation. He was incarcerated until he turned 18. Enzo returned home once again, but family conflict seemed insurmountable and reignited after every return.

Daniel: Why did you leave?

Enzo: Oh, because I can't live with my mother. Me and her cannot stay under the same roof without wanting to kill each other. It's been like that my whole life.

He had finally disclosed his sexual orientation without major conflict, perhaps because of the gradual family acceptance of his gay brother and the centrality and intensity of other conflicts. Throughout his life, Enzo spent time at group homes, on the streets, and in shelters, often experiencing verbal and physical abuse from other youth. At the time of the interview, he was staying at a youth shelter, but he was making plans to attend college.

Although these four young men experienced engagement with youth systems, the time of placement and the level of stability in the systems later determined their housing situation and opportunities. Early placement in childhood accelerated Julio's and Sean's sense of isolation, dislocated their family position, and disconnected them from supportive family networks. On the other hand, Enzo and Walter were placed later in adolescence, which helped them maintain family ties, albeit fragile. As a result, they were able to return home during spells of homelessness, even if for brief periods of time.

Pathway 2: Housing Instability Resulting from Severe Conflict Over Sexual Orientation

Most youths who grew up with their families (10/11) reported some form of parental conflict over their sexual orientation, but only three of them (3/10) reported their homelessness was solely a result of their parents' homophobic and religious views. When youth were kicked out due exclusively to their homosexual identity, the root of the conflict was easier to determine in their narratives of leaving home. In one case, disclosure resulted in immediate expulsion from home. In the other two cases, youths and their families engaged in long term conflict over a variety of issues related to their sexual identity. Specifically, youth spoke of simmering conflict over masculinity, gender presentation, and gay lifestyle.Religious views on homosexuality and rejection of gay youth.

Well mannered, affable, and soft-spoken, Felipe, 19, grew up with his upper-middle class parents in Mexico. He was slender, medium height, and masculine with attractive Native Mexican features. His parents divorced when he was five, and soon after, he and his older sister were placed in Mormon boarding school. Seeing them sporadically, he became estranged from them. At 18, Felipe's father took him to the US West Coast to attend school. Felipe had dated women but had known for some time about his attraction to men. A homosexual experience before migrating and the arrival to a more open environment accelerated his uptake of a gay identity. Simultaneously, his father was insisting on an arranged Mormon marriage. After several months of insistence, Felipe finally disclosed his sexual orientation after returning from dinner with the potential bride's family.

Felipe: We went up to the study and talked. Then, I told him the truth because in reality I did not want to lie to him. It had been already a long time doing it. Then, I told him that I could not get married because I was… gay. That easy. “I'm gay,” I told him. Then, he said… the first thing he said was: “I cannot have a gay son.”

Not only did the father reject his son's homosexuality but also Felipe as his son.

Felipe: “Since I'm never going to accept it, you must leave the house,” he said. “But how, I don't have anything, how could you want me to leave?” I said. “Leave my house, give me back the cards I gave you, give me the car keys, and you leave only with the clothes you are wearing, leave now. I give you two hours for you to leave, and I don't want to see you again,” he told me. I, “Wow, what am I going to do? I'm studying, I would have to drop everything." "I don't care," he said, "for me, you don't exist anymore; for me, I will assume I only have your sister and that's all. That's it."

Instead of arguing and feeling that there was nothing for him left at home, Felipe migrated to NYC. New in the country, Felipe did not have an extended family or peer network to moderate the impact of the expulsion. After arriving to NYC, he stayed at a homeless youth shelter for a few weeks until he found a job and moved out. Lacking reliable and consistent income, he was losing his room the day after the interview.

After weighting the positive and negative life changes in the previous seven months, Felipe stressed the seeming contradiction of having lost everything he cherished and the relief of being finally truthful to himself and others about his sexual orientation.

Felipe: [After arriving to NYC] I felt at least… like better. I thought OK, finally, I'm going to be able to live a life that… I won't have to hide from other people when going out. If I meet a guy, I don't have to hide it so people who know me don't see me.

Perhaps because of his potential to access other support networks and his social, economic, and educational background, Felipe saw his situation as temporary. Although he had tried unsuccessfully to reconnect with his father, he was confident that sooner or later his father would accept him. He had contacted his sister, who was living now in Spain, and she asked him to join her in Europe or perhaps return to Mexico.

Rejection of non-gender conforming gay youth—"I cannot have a gay son" was also Rafael's father's response to disclosure of sexual orientation. However, in this case, the response was rooted more in cultural views on gender performance rather than religion. Like Felipe, Rafael, 21, had a solid economic background. He grew up in the Dominican Republic with his mother and stepfather, but his father, who lived in New York City, visited them every year. Slender, tall, and dark skinned, Rafael was outgoing and bubbling with a boyish look. By age 11 Rafael had his first sexual relationship with a school mate. His openess about being gay and his "effeminacy" exposed him to verbal harassment at school. But instead of submitting to abuse, Rafael developed a strong stance on his sexual identity. At 18, he disclosed his sexual orientation to his mother and stepfather, and rather than severe conflict, disclosure led to gradual acceptance and support. However, his family asked him not to tell his father.

After Rafael finished highschool, his father offered economic support to attend school in the US. He moved to NYC, but his effeminacy and sexual orientation triggered conflict with his father. After some time Rafael finally confronted his father.

Daniel: Tell me what happened. He told you "you are gay"…

Rafael: Well, uhm, he said: "I don't like gay people. I'm a man that has 8 children with 6 different women"… you know, the typical Dominican macho men… "And I don't like you, I don't like you because… I don't know why you turned out to be a maricón (faggot)." I'm sorry for using that word.

Daniel: No, here you can use any words you want.

Rafael: "I don't know why you turned out to be a maricón, but… I don't want you living here because you have younger siblings and I don't want you influencing them… they could see what you do so I don't want you living here." He kicked me out… and I came here to the [organization].

Daniel: And how long did it pass between when he told you "leave" and you left?

Rafael: The same night.

Unlike Felipe, Rafael had a strong family and social support network in the US that allowed him bypass the shelters for some time.

The shame of having a homeless son and the acceptance of Rafael's homosexuality by other family members made his father reconsider his decision. But after 10 days of returning home, they had another argument over his effeminacy, and Rafael left again. His father's views on homosexuality, masculinity and gender prevented him from fully accepting Rafael back home. On the other hand, Rafael felt uncomfortable and unwilling to behave in ways that contravened his sense of identity.

Daniel: And is there a way to return home?

Rafael: Yes, there is a way, but I don't want to return to him because I don't want to be in a place where I'm going to feel uncomfortable. I know that returning with him I'm going to feel uncomfortable because… I'm not going to be able to act natural, like I'm, homosexual.

Daniel: How so?

Rafael: Well, because even though he accepts that I'm homosexual, he doesn't like to see me acting in a natural way, like gay. Like for example that I walk or talk in certain way, or dress in certain way… he doesn't like it.

At the time of the interview, he was staying at a youth housing program. His family knew that he was back in a housing program for homeless youth but kept it a secret from his father. Optimistic about his future, Rafael had a job at a factory and had restarted college with his father's economic support.

The synergistic impact of religious and cultural rejection—While severe conflict might lead to immediate expulsion from home, family conflict can extend over a long period of time, resulting in further discrimination rather than acceptance. Born in a medium-size city in Mexico, Agustín, 21, was short and stocky with Native Mexican features. Intelligent and resilient, he was also shy, soft-spoken, and introspective. Initially, Agustín's parents did not address his sexual orientation directly but harassed him constantly because of his mannerisms. A pastor at a Christian church, his father called him *puto* and *loca* (Mexican terms equivalent to "faggot") and hit him often to restrain his effeminacy. Ultimately, the family conflict exacerbated, and his siblings rejected him as well.

Agustín's development of a sexual orientation occurred in the midst of family verbal and physical abuse, creating intense anguish over many parts of his identity. At 13, Agustín started a sexual relationship with a classmate, and having male-to-male sex in the midst of his sexual awakening changed how he saw himself in relation to his family, religion, and community.

Agustín: When one has sexual relations… well, that tore apart everything I was, what family was, what religion was, everything. I couldn't be a hypocrite any more or go to church and say I was a Christian. Then I felt that, that I had sinned and all of that.

By the time Agustín graduated from *Secundaria* at 14i, the arguments had moved from his effeminacy to his gay identiy. While Agustín tried to kill himself because of it, he also challenged the physical abuse and the labeling of his homosexuality as sin or sickness.

[i]In Mexico, *Secundaria* refers more or less to the equivalent of junior high. *Preparatoria* refers to the equivalent of high school.

Agustín: I didn't care anymore. I started to show it more… and be more rebellious and everything… and participate in the life of my female classmates… and although it was against my father's religion… I felt that I couldn't follow his religion because… according to the law, everyone has the right to follow his own religion. I would tell him that, and also… when I was little, I used to read a lot about homosexuality. Late, at 14, I would fight with dad, right? And when they wanted to hit me, I would lock myself in my room, and I would yell at them everything I knew about homosexuality, and would tell them I was not sick and all of that.

At age 15, he took a bus to Mexico City. On the streets, he was robbed and sexually harassed by other street youth. He stayed at a youth program for several months. Although the program officials returned him home, six months later he returned to the shelter because of renewed abuse. In retrospect, Agustín felt that despite the hardship and housing instability, he had gained a greater sense of self and freedom.

Agustín: If I had done what my parents wanted for me to do, well, I would have lived a life that… for me, it wasn't worthy. Because it wouldn't be what I [was]… Because I would lie to my family, to God… and to myself. When I went to live to Mexico, I was freer. I showed myself as I was despite criticisms. I always showed how I was. I felt freer that way. I never felt regrets.

Years later, after graduating from high school, he felt that he could not remain in Mexico because of lack of opportunities and homophobic social mores. He migrated illegally across the border and made his way to NYC. He broke contact with his family. At the time of the interview, he was staying at one of the housing programs at the CBO.

While Felipe's disclosure led to immediate expulsion, abruptly disrupting his housing stability, other youth endured long periods of verbal and physical family abuse that challenged their efforts to develop a positive identity. Despite leaving home and, perhaps, because of it, Felipe, Agustín, and Rafael felt a greater sense of self, freedom, and authenticity. The level of dislocation in the family position and their ability to access again family networks and resources varied across youths. Felipe and Rafael envisioned reconnecting fully with their families, but Agustín felt no hope of returning home.

Pathway 3: Sexual Orientation Exacerbates Pre-existing Conflict

Half of the youths (7/13) had never met their fathers and only six grew up in two-parent households. Ten out of the thirteen (10/13) youths interviewed reported verbal abuse, five (5/13) physical violence, and four (4/13) sexual abuse by other relatives while at home. In addition, several youths reported family mental illness (3/13) and substance use (6/13) as sources of family distress. Not surprisingly, over half of the youths (7/13) had experienced involvement with child services organizations due to parental mental illness or drug abuse.

Of the eleven youths who grew up with families, most of them (8/11) reported conflict over issues other than sexual orientation. The stories of six youths show how once issues of sexual orientation, gender performance, or engagement in gay social life entered the family dynamics, they became intertwined with pre-existing conflict. According to the youth, parental complaints centered on three major areas: disruptive behavioral conduct (3/11), perceived lack of personal responsibility (6/11), and prioritizing nightlife (5/11).

The impact of health and behavioral disorders on family conflict—For Jeremy and Frank, sexual orientation disclosure added to the ongoing family conflict over their severe substance use, mental illness, and behavioral disorders. Jeremy, 24, was born in NYC. He was short and stocky, with soft facial features. He was often the topic of discussion during the weekly clinical meetings. Perhaps because of his ADHD and Intellectual Disability diagnoses and childish attitude, he was liked and cared for by staff and clients. Jeremy spoke nonchalantly of physical and psychological abuse at home at the hands of his mother and stepfather:

Jeremy:	If I did something wrong, they take extension cord or they with the belt. It used to be hard. It used to burn.
Daniel:	A lot? What kind of things did you do?
Jeremy:	Like if I don't listen to her and if I miss school one day, she find out, ass whipping. She tell me to take off my clothes, take a shower. I'm like, “Okay, I don't want a shower.” She say, “Leave the door open.” I had to leave the door open, with the belt “Pow, pow!”

At age 6, the state transferred Jeremy's custody to his grandmother because of maternal abuse and neglect. However, she lived in the same building, allowing Jeremy to remain connected to his extended family. He ran away at age 13 but came home shortly after. Jeremy was sexually active since age 9, and at 14 he disclosed his sexual orientation to his family. Although his mother and stepfather reacted badly at first, most relatives did not care, and he remained home with his grandmother. Nonetheless, his behavior and sexual orientation intersected to increase family conflict.

Jeremy:	I was living with her [grandmother], ever since I was a baby, like five or six years old, until sixteen, fifteen years old, and then she kicked me out.
Daniel:	Your grandma? What did she say?
Jeremy:	Because at that point, it was my birthday. Everybody got drunk. We was all drunk, screaming and hollering and everything. Then she start screaming. She called the cops on me and the cops kicked me out of the house.
Daniel:	Oh, really? What did she say?
Jeremy:	There's too many fags here. The cops said, “If you don't leave, we're going to get the lock up.”
Daniel:	Where did you go?
Jeremy:	I went to the shelter. Ali Forney, Covenant House, Promesa, Street Works, I'm into all the shelter system.

Although he often stayed at shelters, he also returned to live with his grandmother or siblings. He had run away several times before because of physical abuse and his dislike of home rules, but his family always took him back. Jeremy had difficulties adhering to rules and regulations at the institutions where he stayed -housing programs, group homes, or supportive housing. A couple of times during my fieldwork, Jeremy stopped taking his medication and self-discharged from supportive housing. At the time of the interview, he was working as a building security guard and was worried about his imminent ageing out of youth programs.

Like Jeremy, Frank, 20, had been placed with his grandmother because of his mother's abuse and neglect. His mother had returned home to live with them when he was 8 but died of cancer four years later. Born in New Jersey, he was tall, stocky, and brown-skinned. Growing up, he felt isolated at his school, had few friends, and experienced verbal abuse at home and school. After his mother's death, Frank's severe depression and suicide attempts resulted in episodes of hospitalization.

At age 14, Frank started a secret, ongoing relationship with a 32-year-old man. At sixteen, he was skipping school and spending more time in NYC with his boyfriend, so he decided to disclose his sexual orientation to his grandmother.

Frank: I knew I was gay. I told my grandmother when I was sixteen, like, “I'm gay, and I like boys.” I already had sex and everything. She kicked me out.

Daniel: What did she say?

Frank: She was like, “Get your shit and get out of here. I don't want you staying here. You're going to have to go somewhere, to a shelter or you're going to have to go to a group home.”

However, Frank did not leave right away. He remained at home for a week until he moved in with his boyfriend in NYC. About two years later, they broke up due to their violent relationship, and Frank returned to live with his grandmother.

Frank: Mhmm, and then I started renting rooms and stuff like that, from people. I didn't want to stay with my grandmother because I knew how she was.

Daniel: But, she let you in.

Frank: Yeah, I stayed there for like a month and then I started renting rooms. I came back out here because I didn't want to be in Jersey. But, when I came out here, I didn't have anywhere to go. I was in the street for eight months because I didn't have anywhere to go.

He also tried to live with relatives, but the severity of family conflict, his behavioral conduct, and sexual orientation precluded him from obtaining full family support. Frank left New Jersey again and stayed in New York's Central Park for eight months. During this time, he engaged in heavy substance use and self-cutting. Family conflict worsened when he stole money and jewelry from his grandmother to buy drugs. After a year, Frank finally stopped abusing drugs on his own and moved into the shelter system. He had recently found out that he had contracted HIV from his older ex-boyfriend. He had been discharged from several housing programs since then. At the time of the interview, he was staying at Sylvia's, an LGBT shelter, and he felt that perhaps he had an opportunity to start over.

Despite the remarks of their grandmothers, Jeremy and Frank returned to live with them, indicating a level of acceptance and support. However, the intersection of behavioral issues, substance use, mental illness, and prejudice were often hard to extricate from their accounts of family conflict. For these young men, the intersection of multiple issues stressed the family dynamics to the point that youth and/or their families saw separation as the best alternative.

Lack of educational and employment goals—Participants reported parental frustration with their children's lack of educational and employment goals. According to the youth, their parents' main complains focused on skipping school, lack of college plans, staying out late, lack of employment, or not showing up for work. These issues intersected with youth's disclosure of sexual orientation and engagement in gay life, further destabilizing their family situation and ultimately leading to homelessness.

Born in the Bronx, Anderson, 21, was dark-skinned, short, and medium built. At 12, he and his sister moved in with his grandmother after his mother's death. However, the conditions for remaining at home changed when his maternal uncle moved in after his grandmother died. With no plans for college or employment after finishing high school, he was asked to leave, a departure that ultimately led to his homelessness. After many years, Anderson had reinitiated contact with his father and went to live with him and his stepmother in a small studio. However, he was asked to leave several months later because of his lack of a job and staying out late in Manhattan with other youth.

Anderson: It was because I didn't have a job. It was because I wasn't pursuing to do nothing. I was just laying around and going out, hang out really late and come back home around three or four in the morning. I was an adult. He gave me keys to the house so I'd just come home, eat, lay down, chill, play video games, go back out again, come back home late, consistently so. He just thought I didn't want to do nothing with my life. He kicked me out.

Unable to go back to his uncle's, Anderson had his first spell of homelessness. He went to an adult shelter where he became a victim of harassment and physical violence because of his bisexuality. Although Anderson went back to his father's, family conflict restarted.

Anderson: My step-mom came up to my dad. They were having a conversation because I heard; I was in the room. She was like, “You need to accept that he's gay.” This all happened because of my dressing style. I like to wear skinny jeans and things like that. She took it really seriously. It was because of my dressing style and plus I was hanging out really late. At first, she used to think I was prostituting. I would go out early in the morning and not come back until really late or really early in the morning, like 3 or 4 in the morning. My father was concerned. She kept convincing him that I was prostituting.

His father reassured him of his acceptance regardless of his sexual orientation, but Anderson became tired of family conflict and left. He lived with a new boyfriend for some months before becoming homeless again and sleeping on the beach. Anderson's well-being deteriorated. He had been hospitalized for suicide ideations and self-cutting, and he was taking medication for anxiety and depression. At the time of the interview, he was in one of the housing programs at the CBO and getting ready for college. His father was still supporting him emotionally and economically, and his relationship with his stepmother had improved.

Similarly, Justin, 19, reported that his family perceived his focus on hanging out and lack of employment and educational plans as proof of his lack of responsibility. The second of five kids, Justin was born in the Bronx to a Puerto Rican family. Short, slim, light skinned, he had a vivacious face. He considered himself as easy going, cool, friendly, and energetic. Although he reported some heavy social drinking in the extended family, there were no indications of family abuse or neglect.

Justin had endured some verbal harassment in high school after coming out as bisexual, but he also reported having supportive school friends. Justin's coming out experience to his mother was also positive.

Justin: She would have liked me to tell her earlier, but like I told her, I was nervous and afraid she might kick me out because that happened to some of my friends. They'll tell their parents that they gay or bisexual or lesbian and they parents would bug out and kick them out. So I thought the same thing but when I told her - when I told my mom, my mom accepted me for who I was, and stuff. And, she didn't mind it. She was like, “Alright, if anything you know you can tell me,” and I was like, “Yeah.” She gave me a big hug.

Although Justin was close to his mother, the relationship with his father had been fraught with conflict related to skipping school, refusing to do chores, and staying out late. In fact, Justin had run away twice before his disclosure, staying with friends in the same building. Nonetheless, his father had taken him back on both occasions at the request of the mother.

After graduating from high school, conflict with his father intensified due to Justin's joblessness and lack of concrete higher-education plans. When his sister told their father about Justin's sexual orientation, it added another reason for father-son conflict.

Justin: One day, my dad just took all his anger out and started saying, “Oh, you're bisexual… blah blah blah; this is a straight family…blah blah blah,” and from there we just started arguing. He told me to leave. I said, “Give me my information [education cards]," and he said, "Oh, you want your information," and he burned it all. I didn't have no information so I stood in the streets for like three months.

His mother tried to intercede for him, this time to no avail. Justin believed his father was using his sexual orientation as an excuse to kick him out.

Justin: But, I'll call my mom from time to time, and I'll go visit her. I let her know how I'm doing. Every time she see me, she's happy and then when I leave, she start crying because she don't want me to leave. I know how she feels, but it's not my fault. I want to go back home, but my mom keeps asking my dad, but she's like, "Oh, he says no, he's not coming back home. He gotta stay out there and live by himself; he gotta learn how to live by himself, like grow up."

Justin expressed his desire to reinitiate his relationship with his father and demonstrate to him some independence and responsibility. At the time of the interview, he was staying at a shelter and moving slowly towards independence.

As parents tried to increase their children's sense of responsibility through the enforcement of rules and regulation (e.g., curfew, doing shores), Anderson and Justin perceived these restrictions as an attempt to control them and constrain their claim to independence. Hence, it was often hard for these youths to discern the contribution of sexual orientation issues to conflict from those related to traditional markers of adulthood such as education and employment.

Prioritizing street gay culture over housing stability—As we have seen, disclosure of homosexual orientation did not always result in leaving home or being kicked out right away. Instead, many youths spoke of developing a gay identity in the midst of a complex negotiation of authority and independence. I met Marco, 20, towards the end of my fieldwork. He left home and an economic safety net without finishing high school, but exuded optimism. Marco grew up with his mother and grandfather in Connecticut. By 10, the family moved to NYC. His father left when he was a child, and Marco had not seen him again until recently. He was medium built and average height. He had a pretty face and an outgoing, friendly demeanor.

Marco had disclosed his sexual orientation to his siblings, mother, and stepfather. Although their initial reaction was somewhat negative, they later provided him with emotional support and acceptance.

Marco: I told her [mother] at first I was bisexual. My sister told her that - I told my sister to tell her. She did it right in front of me. My mom was quiet, and we got into an argument, and then we started yelling at each other and this and that. Later that same year, which was 2008, that same year in August I told her I was gay, she just looked and laughed a little and that was it.

His narrative of coming out did not seem severe enough to merit leaving home. Asked about the possibility of returning home, he rejected the possibility of family reunification. Marco was reluctant to discuss in detail the reasons why he and his mother and stepfather argued constantly. However, he mentioned that conflict over a variety of issues had become too much for him.

Daniel: What kind of problems were you having with your mom?

Marco: A lot of things, problems at home, me not doing this, me not doing that. She thinks I don't want to do this or I don't want to do that… things at school, I dealt with my stepfather, and all this stuff. It's just too much drama.

Marco's departure was the expected outcome of the long-term family conflict. After his stepfather asked him to leave, his actual departure was uneventful.

Daniel: And did they say, “You need to get out”?

Marco: He said he wanted me to fricking leave but my mom was like … I wasn't going to go but then he wanted me to leave so I just fricking left when they left the place. That was it.

Daniel: You just got tired and decided to leave.

Marco: Yeah, because he wanted me to leave so I left.

Daniel: What did your mother say?

Marco: She didn't say nothing at all.

Indeed, Marco had already discussed with his school guidance counselor the possibility of leaving home and went to the shelter his counselor recommended the night he left. Marco encountered similar challenges at the housing programs. He had been discharged several times for not following regulations and had slept on the streets on several occasions. At the time of the interview, six months after becoming homeless, he had a part-time job that provided him some economic stability. However, Marco was leaving his job and the housing program to move to Florida with a new boyfriend he had met three months earlier.

I met Hector, 21, at the beginning of my research project. His case puzzled and exasperated staff. Despite his personal potential and family acceptance, he prioritized his engagement in street gay culture and sexual exploration over his housing stability. He was charming and smart, with middle-class background and mannerisms. Born in NYC, he was a tall, stocky, light-skinned Latino. His good looks, mischievousness, and sense of humor made him popular among clients and staff. When his parents divorced at age 12, Hector moved in with his mother to Florida. Just before turning 18 and before any sexual experience or disclosure to his family, he ran away because of arguments about his lack of responsibility. Somewhat bored during the interview, he became excited telling me about his experiences as a homeless person.

Hector: When I was living with my mom, me and my mom are cool and all, but we can't live with each other. There's just so many personality conflicts, and it's like we'll really yell at each other all the time. So when I was 18, I ran away from home. I just stayed out on the streets for, like, weeks and weeks and then my friend's family took me in. I was like, “Okay, cool.”

After several months, he returned home and disclosed to his family. Although his parents were supportive, he felt that he needed some time to explore his gay identity. He dropped out of high school and moved to NYC because of its gay life.

Hector: Yeah, I told my mom about it and she was like, “Well, I don't want you moving back to New York.” I was like, “Well, mom, I'm 19 now, I can make my own decisions, and I want to go back to the city.” And I don't regret my decision, even though I'm in a shelter, I don't regret it — I love New York too much.

He stayed with his father and aunt, but several months later his father took him to a local shelter. At the time of his first placement, Hector considered himself bisexual. He talked excitedly about engaging in high levels of sexual activity while at shelters and emergency housing programs. By the time Hector went to his second shelter a month later, he had embraced a gay identity and left behind a bisexual one. As Hector explained,

Hector: So, they sent me here and they sent me to Sylvia's Place and that's when the real gay boy came out and I was like holy Hell, I'm a fag.

Daniel: So, what happened? So you got - were you expecting Sylvia's to be like that?

Hector: No, I really wasn't and when I got there it was like, there was so much gay people. I was like "I'm home." I felt so comfortable there.

At the cost of leaving home, Hector spoke of being able to explore his sexuality and consolidate his identity. For the last two years, Hector had been in many shelters, housing programs, back home, with friends, and on the streets. During the interview, Hector described his two years of homelessness with multiple allusions to his sex life.

Hector: I got to Covenant House probably November, I think, November - no, after my birthday – probably August I was at Covenant House. I forget when, but it was a while back. But, after Covenant House – from the time period I got into Covenant House, to about three or four months ago, I've been a lazy prick who's only cared about sex and having fun, parties, chilling, and things like that.

Program staff kept trying to make him comply with program regulations and attempt family reunification, but he had refused. Nonetheless, his family provided him with emotional and economic support throughout his homelessness. By the end of my fieldwork, Hector was attending college and seemed to have lost interest in gay street culture.

Normative conflict related to adolescence and disclosure of sexual orientation exacerbated pre-existing family conflict, creating intricate and confusing family dynamics. As exemplified in the previous six stories, while the parents were fed up with their children's behavioral disorders and lack of employment and educational goals and asked them to leave, the youth became tired of parental recriminations and demands on their sexuality and wanted to leave. Even though most youths reported they could not live with their parents because of the difficulties of adhering to rules and authority, many maintained contact with family networks. They often received emotional and financial support and reported going back and forth between shelters and home.

Discussion

This paper relies on in-depth interviews with 14 homeless Latino young gay and bisexual men who were accessing services at a community-based organization serving homeless LGBT youth. Therefore, their stories might not be representative of homeless young men who by-pass the shelter system, experience more severe homelessness, identify as heterosexual, or access non-gay-specific services. Furthermore, the small sample constrained variability on some important subgroups, including youth engaged in sex work and youth not accessing services. In the absence of interviews with their parents or caretakers, it is difficult to substantiate the nature, intensity, and effect of family conflict. Finally, youth were recruited at a community-based organization in a large urban environment with a rich gay community. Gay youth in other geographic areas might present different pathways to homelessness than those described here.

At the same time, the study's methodological and analytical features provide strength to the findings. First, intensive ethnographic fieldwork, an ongoing review of the literature, and concurrent analysis guided the study throughout all of its stages. Secondly, the use of a grounded theory approach made it possible to corroborate and test emerging themes during subsequent field observations and interviews with youths and service providers. Finally, this study provided an insight on the institutional environment of homeless youth services through its 18-month institutional ethnographic work and interviews with services providers.

While their narratives showed a variety of family situations and housing experiences, three main analytical pathways to homelessness emerged from their narratives. First, some young men were placed under the supervision or protection of the state before disclosure of sexual orientation; secondly, other young men were forced to leave or left home due to severe conflict over homosexuality, masculinity, and gender presentation; and, most commonly, disclosure of sexual orientation exacerbated pre-existing family conflict resulting in youth leaving or being forced out. These paths help us characterize in more detail the various relationships between LGBT youth homelessness and sexual orientation.

Similar to other studies (e.g., Hyde, 2005; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997b), this study found that a family environment of conflict, abuse, and neglect placed many youth on early trajectories of housing instability, including leaving or removal from home, placement in foster care, or placement within the justice system. As reported in other studies (e.g., Nesmith, 2006; Tyler, 2006), child services addressed their immediate safety concerns but in some cases also increased their exposure to victimization and health risks and their risks for later homelessness. Indeed, institutionalization distanced them from family networks and resources, resulting in emotional and physical estrangement and dislocation of their position within their families.

These findings also indicate that differences in age of institutionalization and the level of stability in the systems played an important role in youth's ability to re-enter and access family networks. Particularly for those placed in child services at an early age, the lack of strong ties to family networks precluded them from returning home and/or tapping into emotional and financial support later in adolescence. Those able to return home faced some of the same issues that led them away as well as new family conflict over their acquired independence. But unlike their heterosexual peers, these youths had developed a stigmatized sexual orientation that placed additional strain in their efforts to re-enter family networks.

For some other youth, the trigger of homelessness was sexual orientation itself, constituting a second analytical path. In some cases, disclosure resulted in such extreme conflict that parents kicked them out the same day. In other cases, sexual orientation remained a cause of constant friction at home, sometimes accompanied by verbal and physical abuse. At the root of such parental reactions were ingrained traditional views on masculinity, gender presentation, and perceived “gay lifestyle,” often rooted in deep socio-cultural and religious views of homosexuality. While many youths, informally and formally interviewed, were able to negotiate a certain level of friction over sexual orientation and remain home, some other youths were unsuccessful in negotiating conflict and addressing the root causes of parental rejection.

Although this second analytical path has received attention in the study of LGBT youth homelessness (e.g., Beaty, 1999; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Ray, 2006; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009), there is still a need for a better understanding of the socio-cultural contexts in which family conflict occurs. In particular, these findings suggest that parental rejection is connected to religious and socio-cultural views on some specific dimensions of sexual orientation, namely masculinity, gender presentation, and perceived “gay lifestyle.” Undermining a characterization of their situation as merely one of victimization, these youths displayed a great level of determination, agency, and assertiveness. Sexual initiation, engagement in gay culture, and disclosure constituted milestones in these youth's path to a stronger gay or bisexual identity. As Prendergast et al. (2001) found in their study of homeless LGBT youth, despite leaving home and, perhaps, because of it, these youths found greater sense of self, freedom, and authenticity.

While departure from home could occur after disclosure of sexual orientation, more often disclosure was embedded within ongoing conflict over a variety of issues. In this third path to homelessness, youth and parents experienced ongoing family conflict over behavioral issues, perceived lack of personal responsibility, and independence from parental authority, similar to the experiences of homeless heterosexual peers (e.g., Rosenthal, Mallett, & Myers, 2006; Smollar, 1999; Whitbeck et al., 1997b). Significantly, however, disclosure or perception of homosexuality further exacerbated pre-existing family conflicts, thus creating unsustainable “pressure cookers” and accelerating the disintegration of family relations. Parents, otherwise accepting, ambivalent, or resigned about their child's homosexuality, had difficulties dealing with yet another source of conflict.

Often, youth and their parents engaged in a tug of war over the meaning of both independence and homosexuality. The development of their gay identity came at a time of normative adolescent exploration of sex, partying, and drugs. Youth saw their involvement in gay youth subcultures and street life as an important step in their understanding and development of their identity, while their parents might have seen it as the source of their rebelliousness and lack of responsibility. Hence it was often hard for these youths to discern the contribution of sexual orientation issues to conflict from those related to the lack or inadequacy of formal markers of adulthood such as education and employment. Muddling their understanding of reasons for their homelessness, the layering of these sources of conflict made it harder for these youths to tease out the primal sources of conflict and the potential solutions to it.

These analytical paths help us elucidate some major themes in the paths to homelessness, with implications for further research and services. Nonetheless, rather than mutually exclusive, these paths often overlapped, explicit or implicitly, in youth's narratives of family life and conflict and of the reasons for their departure. These overlapping narratives might reflect the simultaneous, long-term processes involved in becoming an adult and developing a non-normative sexual identity. Parents and their children might understand home conflict differently, often conflating issues of sexual orientation with other issues related to adolescence development such as independence, experimentation, and increased responsibility. In some cases, gay youth might have been able to negotiate conflict over sexual orientation per se but unsuccessful in negotiating issues and boundaries related to independence and adolescent lifestyle that parents and youth might link to a sexual orientation.

While many youth return home after some time of homelessness (See Milburn et al., 2007; Milburn et al., 2005; Thompson, Safyer, & Pollio, 2001), most gay youth interviewed did not consider it a long-term option because of the actual or perceived intensity and severity of family conflict, including constant arguing, name-calling, and/or physical and emotional violence. All youth interviewed were living away from home at the moment of the interview and most had returned home at some point. They maintained connection with their families, received some economic support, and in a practical sense, had the option to return home. Ultimately, family reunification or normalization of family relations might be possible for those who are high functioning, present less behavioral issues, and come from less dysfunctional families in the first place. On the other hand, other youth will never be able to engage in reunification efforts whatsoever because of the severity and extent of the family conflict (Walls, Hancock, & Wisneski, 2007).

Conclusions

These three analytical paths draw attention to runaway episodes before and after disclosure of sexual orientation, a broad range of parental responses to disclosure, and some youth's ability to return home and retain family networks and financial support. Therefore, these findings suggest that the potential for homelessness prevention and family reunification will depend on our ability to disaggregate homelessness LGBT youth based on their particular paths to homelessness and on their specific needs as adolescents and as young gay men. While supporting youth in their housing needs and family reunification, child services institutions and service organizations must examine the overlap of developmental processes of adolescence and sexual orientation.

Consistent with cumulative risk theories (See Haber & Toro, 2004; McMorris, Tyler, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2002; Nesmith, 2006; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997a), these narratives point to the accumulation of dysfunctional family situations and stressful environments among homeless youth. For many LGBT youth, the process of developing a gay or bisexual identity exposes them to verbal and physical abuse by peers and adults with serious negative outcomes for their housing stability (Meyer, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1994). But not all LGBT youth become homeless, even in the presence of conduct disorders or severe family conflict. The high number of poor young gay and bisexual men of color in the shelter system indicate the need for addressing the interplay of a number of sociocultural and economic forces that could help some youth to remain home or even bypass the shelter system altogether.

Unfortunately, research among homeless youth has focused on individual-risks and family characteristics, drawing attention away from structural issues and social and economic conditions producing homelessness and negative health outcomes (Haber & Toro, 2004; Karabanow & Clement, 2004). Similarly, institutional reports on LGBT youth homelessness tend to focus on conflict over disclosure to family members rather than on systems of care and sociocultural and economic factors. The great number of LGBT youth with histories of systemization and poverty requires an examination of the shortcomings of state and private systems of care in securing the family's wellbeing and the youth's housing stability after leaving home. There has been an interest in developing appropriate housing opportunities for

LGBT youth (e.g., Hunter, 2008; Walls et al., 2007). Nonetheless, intervention research on LGBT-specific programs is needed for understanding the effectiveness of current service models and guiding the development of new ones. Given the impact of geographic dislocation on availability of social support systems, there is also a need for research on the service needs of LGBT youth migrants, both in the sending and receiving communities.

Although it is tempting to focus on the coming out event itself, this ethnographic project suggests that many gay youth become homeless due to the accumulation of risks from long-term interrelated processes of family disintegration within stressful environments. It also suggests that the family crises leading to leaving home occur at a time during which the youth is trying to become an adult and make sense of his or her sexual orientation. Indeed, conceptualizing LGBT youth homelessness as a long-term social process recognizes that normative adolescent development and the development of a sexual identity are concurrent processes that shape and exacerbate family conflict. It also recognizes the agency and determination of LGBT youth in making sense of who they are through decisions that destabilize not just their housing situation but also their physical and emotional location within a family unit.

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Table 1

	Child services involvement before disclosure	Presence of family caretakers growing up	Family physical abuse	Pre-existing conflict (non-gay related)	Age of leaving family home	Age coming out to caretakers	Family reaction to youth's homosexuality	Stayed with relatives	Returned home after disclosure	Current family financial support	In contact with family/ relatives
Early engagement in child welfare systems											
Sean	Foster care at 4	No	N/A	N/A	4	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No	Yes
Julio	Foster care at 5	No	Yes	N/A	5	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No
Walter	Foster care at 13	Mother	Yes	Yes	13	18	Ongoing conflict	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Enzo	Juvenile system at 13	Mother & stepfather	No	Yes	13	17	Rejection at first, then acceptance	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Severe conflict over sexual orientation and gender presentation											
Felipe	No	Parents	No	No	18	18	Kicked out by father	No	No	No	Yes
Rafael	No	Parents & stepfather	No	No	20	18	Family's acceptance & father's disapproval	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Agustín	Child services at 15	Parents	Yes	No	15	14	Family verbal and physical abuse	No	Yes	No	No
Severe pre-existing family conflict (e.g., substance use, mental illness, behavioral disorders, lack of educational and employment goals) exacerbated after disclosure of sexual orientation											
Jeremy	Custody by grandmother at 6	Grandmother & mother	Yes	Yes	13	14	Family tolerance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Frank	No	Grandmother	No	Yes	16	16	Disapproval	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Anderson	No	Grandmother	No	Yes	19	18	Acceptance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Justin	No	Parents	No	Yes	15	17	Mother's acceptance; father's disapproval	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hector	No	Divorced parents	No	Yes	18	19	Acceptance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

	Child services involvement before disclosure	Presence of family caretakers growing up	Family physical abuse	Pre-existing conflict (non-gay related)	Age of leaving family home	Age coming out to caretakers	Family reaction to youth's homosexuality	Stayed with relatives	Returned home after disclosure	Current family financial support	In contact with family/ relatives
Marco	No	Mother and stepfather	No	Yes	18	18	Rejection at first, then acceptance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes