Tackling housing instability for LGBTIQ+ people in Aotearoa

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Summary

LGBTIQ+ people are disproportionately impacted by homelessness. To address this, we need to understand their upstream experiences of housing instability. This Briefing reports the findings and implications of a study focused on LGBTIQ+ people's experiences of housing instability.

Housing needs to be viewed as a human right. At a minimum, we need political changes such as greater enforcement of the Healthy Homes Standards and improvements to the Tenancy Tribunal process.

Internationally, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and other sexual and gender minorities (LGBTIQ+) people comprise 20-40% of those experiencing homelessness, despite only comprising 5-10% of the general population.[1] LGBTIQ+ people experience disproportionately high rates of the structural, social and biographical factors causing and exacerbating homelessness such as poverty, family relationship breakdown, sexual abuse,

and poor health.[1,2] LGBTIQ+ people have specific needs around avoiding, exiting, and surviving homelessness; service provision is frequently inaccessible and unsafe.[2-4]

This Briefing builds on research that was the first in Aotearoa to look specifically at LGBTIQ+ people's experiences of homelessness. This previous research showed these experiences were shaped by: failures of support and key intervention points; the necessity of survival restricting agency; and the long-term effect of concealing identities and coping with shame, stigma, and trauma.[5-8] Understanding LGBTIQ+ homelessness demands a focus on, and across, systems and institutions. As with any poverty-related "issue," it is important to also look upstream to explore how the phenomenon can be prevented in the first place.

Building on this, recent research has aimed to look at LGBTIQ+ people's experiences of housing instability more broadly.[9] In interviews with 20 LGBTIQ+ people across Aotearoa, respondents were asked about times in their lives when they had had to move a lot, felt like their housing was at risk, and generally felt like they didn't have much stability in their housing.

The respondents were generous, brave, funny, and vulnerable with the stories they shared. Their stories included those about property managers asking people if they were okay with two men renting the house next door when they, the prospective neighbours, had kids. Or landlords entering people's houses and rifling through their belongings while they were out. Stories also included people getting kicked out of flats and their family home for being queer and/or trans. And even landlords and boarding house managers sexually assaulting their tenants.

These interview findings paint a grim picture. The respondents were intimately aware of how their personal experiences were political experiences. They spoke easily and unprompted about the political decisions that caused their various housing struggles; of the way housing is treated as a commodity rather than a human right, of the lack of enforcement of the Healthy Homes Standards, and of the difficulties taking a landlord or property manager to the Tenancy Tribunal.

Because of this, participants developed nuanced survival tactics. These included: not going to house viewings as a couple so they could pretend to be straight; delaying their gender transition; not complaining about their house to avoid landlord retaliation, and so on. Instability was relational, so a significant amount of time and energy was spent managing relationships with landlords, property managers, and flatmates so they did not abruptly lose their housing and find themselves in an episode of homelessness—which, sadly, was not always successful.

All of this had an impact on their sense of self. For some, chronic housing instability prevented them from being able to do any self-actualisation, such as exploring their gender and transitioning. Others felt a sense of limbo and, in some cases, shame that they had not reached supposed "adult" milestones such as financial independence or homeownership. Nevertheless, some became fortified by their experiences, advocating for better treatment for themselves and others. Indeed, some respondents had a strong activist spirit and a strong sense of care and compassion for people who were struggling, driven in large part by their own experiences.

How to achieve greater housing stability?

So, what are some ways we can look upstream and prevent housing instability for LGBTIQ+ people, and through solidarity, potentially also for many other New Zealanders? As a start, the Healthy Homes Standards need better enforcement; central government does not collect data on how many properties are compliant with the Standards, assessments do not have to be carried out by a third party, and the processes around proactive assessments are unclear; thus putting the onus on tenants to report non-compliance.[10,11] There is a low level of monitoring (625 proactive assessments in May 2022-2023) given roughly one third of Aotearoa households are renting, and that LGBTIQ+ people are more likely to be renters.[10-13] The Tenancy Tribunal process needs improving, such as automatic name suppression of renters' names—currently, renters who take their landlord to the Tribunal have to apply to have their name suppressed. Many do not even bother going to the Tribunal even when their landlord has broken the law for fear of having a "black mark" against their name. Property managers need regulating, and the Government's plan to reintroduce no cause evictions should remain a relic of the past.

On a more fundamental level, there is a strong case for moving away from viewing housing as a commodity, and instead a human right. Increased public housing—say, at least 20% of the total housing stock—would increase access to housing, and bolstering renters' rights significantly would make long-term renting a more viable option. Many of the findings of the research cited in this Briefing resonate beyond the LGBTIQ+ community, showing how intersecting lines of marginalisation manifest in inequitable systems. It also shows the need for intersectional, collaborative, solidarity that traverses multiple lines of disempowerment. Collective action to challenge power structures can help us achieve a more equitable housing system for LGBTIQ+ people and all other New Zealanders.

What this Briefing adds

- This Briefing highlights research findings showing the problem of housing instability for LGBTIQ+ people.
- Housing instability is a political experience
- Survival occurs in nuanced ways
- Housing instability is significantly influenced—both positively and negatively—by people's relationships with others
- Instability shapes people's sense of self, and in return, their sense of self shapes how they cope with instability

Implications for policy and practice

- Power imbalances in the housing market need to be removed, such as through enforcement of the Healthy Homes Standards and amendments to how the Tenancy Tribunal operate.
- Political decisions such as the potential reinstating of no cause eviction will worsen housing instability

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