Episode 239 - Dr. Nicholas Forge and Dr. Robin Hartinger-Saunders: Homeless LGBTQ Youth with Child Welfare System Involvement: Using Lived Experiences to Inform Practice

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello from Buffalo and welcome to inSocialWork. My name is Louanne Bakk and I'll be your host for this episode. LGBTQ youth are largely overrepresented within the child welfare system. In addition to facing a number of challenges including abuse neglect discrimination and marginalization a disproportionately larger percentage of LGBTQ youth have a greater risk of being homeless than their heterosexual counterparts. In this episode Dr. Nicholas Forge and Dr. Robin Hartinger-Saunders discuss how their shared interest in homeless youth led to their examination of individuals identifying as LGBTQ with child welfare system involvement. They discuss their research which focuses on identifying factors that can lead to being homeless as well as the characteristics of the LGBTQ homeless youth population. Additionally doctors Forge and Hartinger-Saunders explain why it is important that social workers understand the experiences of LGBTQ youth who are homeless and how this knowledge can help avoid retraumatization. The episode concludes by emphasizing the need to consider the intersection between child welfare system involvement and homelessness and how through the formation of systematic partnerships affective treatment and supports can be provided. Dr. Robin Hartinger-Saunders has over 25 years of experience in the field of child welfare. She is the principal investigator and program director of the title for the child welfare education and training program in Georgia State University's School of Social Work. Dr. Nicholas Forge is a clinical assistant professor in the school social work at Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University. His research focuses on homelessness among sexual and gender expansive identified youth and young adults particularly in the area of child welfare involvement service provision and evidence based practices. Drs Hartinger-Saunders and Forge were interviewed in March 2013 by Seventy Hall who is a Ph.D. candidate here at the UB school of social work.

[00:03:28] My name is Seventy. I'm here with Dr. Nicholas forge and Dr. Robin Hartinger-Saunders. Robin did you want to start off telling me a little bit about your background and how you came to partner with Nicholas on this project?

[00:03:42] Sure that's an excellent question. It was really a natural fit given our background. My primary area of research examines multilevel factors that contribute to child welfare issues and predict outcomes for children and families. I have over 25 years experience in the field of child welfare including 11 a practice experience working for Chautauqua County Department of Social Services.

[00:04:04] My background is slightly different from Robin in that I don't necessarily have a child welfare background but I have previous involvement with a youth who identify as being homeless in terms of living in shelters first in New York City and also additionally here in Atlanta.

[00:04:24] So how did you come to work together on this topic.

[00:04:28] Well because of my child welfare background and looking at outcomes for youth we know that there is a high population of children who have child welfare experience who are homeless. So seeing that as an outcome a negative outcome for a child coming out of the child welfare system that got me interested in the topic of homelessness and foster youth. Dr. Nicholas

Forge is doing this work here in Atlanta. And I was interested in partnering with him

[00:05:03] After you partnered, How did you get involved in your current research project with the Atlanta youth count on our campus here at Georgia State University?

[00:05:11] We have colleagues who have a shared interest in the well-being of youth who are experiencing homelessness and led by Dr. Eric Wright and Erin Rule in the Department of Sociology. Several faculty members came together to discuss the issue and possibility of conducting a youth count needs assessment Robin and I knew that as social workers we could bring our knowledge and perspective to the project. Thus we became part of an interdisciplinary collaboration that really included the Department of Sociology the school of public health and the school of social work. Within Georgia State University as well as externally university partners that included Emory University public health and Morehouse School of Medicine. In addition we had numerous community partners that included 12 principal community based providers and we also included the expertise of youth who had previously experienced homelessness which has been vital to the success of our project.

[00:06:07] So how specifically did you involve youth.

[00:06:10] Consider if you had previously experienced homelessness really as experts in their own lives and so we understood that they would be able to tell us initially exactly where homeless youth resided. what some of the issues may be what potential questions should be asked of homeless youth and so they help us from the planning phase that included the planning of the survey instrument to the implementation phase where they directed us to areas in the metro Atlanta area where homeless youth were known to reside. And they also helped us understand exactly what some of the social structures that exist within these populations who are experiencing homelessness.

[00:07:03] What does current research tell us about the population that you worked with.

[00:07:08] There is actually little information about the population that we examined in our study. Just to give you a little background 2015 approximately 21000 youth in the United States aged out of the foster care system meaning they were either adopted or reunified with their family of origin. So over the past few decades studies have consistently indicated a strong association between experiencing homelessness and having prior placement in the foster care system. So that's troubling euthanasia to foster care among the population. The greatest risk of becoming homeless was as many unhappy youth experiencing homelessness are holding a within 18 months of exit from the foster care system. So for me my focus on outcomes for kids and the child welfare system. I see this as very troublesome now for youth who identify as lesbian gay bisexual transgender questioning or as a sexual or gender expanse of the risk of becoming homeless or facing housing instability is greater than that faced by their says gender heterosexual counterpart. Studies indicate that between 20 and 40 percent of youth homelessness identify as LGBTQ which we see is a significant overrepresentation when you compare that to general population estimate. Although many LGBTQ youth come into foster care through traditional routes meaning you know the child maltreatment by their biological parents or caregiver. They also come into the child welfare system under circumstances uniquely attributed to their sexual orientation or gender identity and that would be things like Rathmann rejection alienation my parents or caregivers or even other family members. So the referrals per child welfare services for LGBTQ youth may initially seem unrelated to their sexual and gendered sense of identity. However there is research that reveals that maltreatment is primarily in response to youth sexual orientation or gender identity. In fact around 30 percent of sexual and gender sense of youth in foster care are reported experiencing violence after revealing this to their family members. That's a very high percentage and we need to be concerned about that as child welfare professionals. Studies suggest that LGBTQ are actually 1.2 times more likely to be

physically abused almost four times more likely to experience sexual abuse. You know that there are high rates of child welfare involved in the homeless population. We know that there's high rates of LGBTQ identified homeless population. So the fact that of these groups separately experience high rates of homelessness really lead Nyquist and I into a discussion of whether LGBTQ youth who also have previous welfare experience were at an even greater disadvantage that our heterosexual society peers. So we wanted to test this empirically which is why we were led to the Atlanta youth count. Nicholas will talk a little bit about the questions that we ask in our research.

[00:10:00] I think that it's important to say first of the overarching study counted use experiencing homelessness and survey their experiences to need the full sample was comprised of 600 and 93 homeless and runaway youth between the ages of 14 and 25 who are experiencing homelessness in metro Atlanta at the time of the survey. But from that full sample Robin and I were interested in identifying the number of LGBTQ identified use experiencing homelessness who have some form of prior child welfare involvement. And we wanted to learn more about their experiences both prior to becoming homeless and while they were experiencing homelessness. We were specifically interested in describing the subsample and the survey instrument contained that indicated where the participants have been in the foster care system due to abuse and or neglect if they've been in the foster care system due to juvenile delinquency or if they had received any child welfare services other than foster care. Specifically, we included demographic information that included age race ethnicity sexual orientation and gender identity. We also asked participants the reasons for and the length of time that they had been homeless and we wanted to explore each participant's exposure to trauma. So a series of questions were asked that were related to abuse and victimization. Exposure to violence both in the home and also in their community of origin as well as any experience with commercial sexual exploitation included measures of mental health problems indicators of serious mental health challenges and health risk behaviors such as substance abuse and risky sexual behavior. And we also wanted to understand some aspects of social support so we included questions related to the number of family or friends or professionals that participants felt they could rely on as well as membership in a street family.

[00:11:57] Could you explain how homelessness was defined

[00:12:00] youths who were homeless or had runaway between the ages of 14 and 25 who were one living independently with no consistent support from parents or other family members and two without a permanent stable residence at the time of the survey were eligible to participate in the study.

[00:12:17] What were your findings.

[00:12:19] Well we found that youth who had prior child welfare system involvement comprise 43 percent of the full Atlanta youth count sample within the child welfare system and involved sample 60 percent indicated that they had been in foster care because of previous abuse and neglect 38 percent had been in care because of juvenile delinquency or criminal behavior and 43 percent reported receiving services from the child welfare system other than foster care involvement. Of those youth who had been in the foster care system 11 percent were under the age of 21 and were eligible to return to care a lot percentage experience the parent going to prison or jail. The child welfare system in both sample was comprised of respondents who were primarily black and male with a mean age of 21 within the child welfare system. In both sample. About 30 percent of youth self-identified as lesbian gay bisexual or queer. And about 9 percent identified as transgender. Most child welfare system involved study participants. About 62 percent reported living in Georgia when they first became homeless and at the time of the survey 44 percent of the respondents had been experiencing homelessness for over six months and over 60 percent of that sample reported being homeless between two and three times in the past three years. One fifth of the sample reported to

developmental learning disability. And over half had a tank less than a high school education. We compared LGBTQ identified youth with youth who identified as heterosexual and cisgender and in terms of their pathway to homelessness and also the length of the time that they were homeless. We found that a third of youth who were LGBTQ identified had been kicked out of their homes compared to 19.7 percent of youth who were heterosexual and Cisgender more youth who were heterosexual cisgender. About a third reported being homeless use of family violence compared to 21 percent of youth who identified as LGBTQ. The majority experience homelessness between one month to one year. However approximately one third of youth who identified as LGBTQ had been homeless for more than one year and that compared to approximately a quarter of youth who identified as heterosexual cisgender.

[00:14:47] Now in terms of trauma experience by our population we found some pretty compelling results. Two thirds of the youth who were LGBTQ and over one half of youth were heterosexual substandard report experiencing child abuse. Additionally 77 percent of those youth who were LGBTQ and 71 percent of youth were heterosexual. The center reported exposure to violence not only in our homes but also in their neighborhood of origin. And we did find significant differences between youth who are LGBTQ and youth who were heterosexual and gender around experiences sexual violence as well sexual violence as a child and also extract and victimization while they were home are over half of you who identified as LGBTQ were victimized while they were homeless compared to one third of youth who are heterosexual to gender. We also look to mental health and risk behaviors. And while we didn't find any significant differences between youth who identified as LGBTQ and youth who were heterosexual cisgender regarding their experiences with mental health problems or indicators of serious mental health we did find that 45 percent of LGBTQ youth and 37 percent of youth wha are cisgender self-identified that they had experienced a mental health problem. More youth who identified as LGBTQ and that was actually 70 percent reported using alcohol in the past compared to about half of youth who were heterosexual cisgender. And although we didn't have a significant response it is worth noting that both LGBTQ identified and heterosexual cisgender identified youth reported high rates of unprotected intercourse

[00:16:34] In terms of social support. We looked at who these youths went to for support while they were homeless. Overall most youth who are LGBTQ identified adult friends as their main source of social support. The finding was similar for youth who are heterosexual says gender almost one half of youth or LGBTQ identified at least one professional contact as a source of support compared to one third of youth who are heterosexual cisgender.

[00:17:02] There are a couple of pertinent points relevant to the child welfare system here in Georgia that we would like to point out Those aging out of foster care often have not been taught basic life skills needed to achieve successful independent living and among the youth in a sample. We've found that 62 percent lived in Georgia at the time that they first became homeless. Now this is important because 11 percent who had been in foster care were of an age at the time of the study where they could have continued receiving services from the child welfare system to assist them with housing and other support such as mental health counseling education and employment counseling. Furthermore one fifth reported a developmental learning disability Just under half had not finished high school with 65 percent of youth who had been in foster care and were between the ages of 18 and 21 at the time of study. They didn't have a high school diploma or a GED and so it appears that for youth who are experiencing homelessness the very system designed to promote safety, permanency, and well-being has fallen short and really draws attention to the fact that youth full through the relative safety net of mainstream services. We need to understand more about why youth who may be eligible to remain in care and receive services such as finishing high school going to college decide not to and I think for Robin and I. This is an important question that we need to include in our future research.

[00:18:29] Why is this an issue that social workers should be concerned about.

[00:18:32] Well I think social workers in many areas of practice can encounter this. The population the homeless service providers social workers and the mental health field medical social workers and even school social workers are social workers who may be placed or embedded in a law enforcement system because homeless youth are on the street and they have unique needs. I think we have to be aware of the population that we're serving and that are out on the street for themselves. Another issue is around trauma because of their trauma histories that were revealed in our findings. We feel strongly that all child services organizations should be trained in trauma informed care to engage with this population. Looking at our findings the reality is they're often met by a system that is neither competent or equipped to address their needs. They are further subjected to bias discrimination isolation and also neglect from the caregivers within the child welfare system. Another thing to note that the violence discrimination and sexual and gender imbalance a few states while in care are frequently intensified actually due to these intersections of identities to which they belong. Many who identify as LGBTQ are also youth of color or also have disabilities or mental health challenges that prevent further barriers for permanent. Also you identified LGBTQ are less likely to achieve permanence they are less likely to be reunified with their parents are less likely to be adopted with transgender you having the most difficult time. Our code of ethics charges us as social workers to challenge social injustices and discrimination that sexual and gender youth face in the system that was freed to protect them. We know that there is a distinct lack of acceptance and affirmation of the identities of sexual and gender sense of youth who are in foster care. Additionally youth who come out have also experienced negative changes and how they are treated by caregiver once they have done that. Research has also shown that many sexual and gender sense if you experience bullying harass and isolation from their peers and even caseworkers and foster parents. So that is a concern as well. There are also more likely to be placed in congregate care and unfortunately more likely to have multiple places which we know after years and years of research has negative outcomes for children and youth. This is an issue that social workers need to be concerned about because child welfare professionals and foster families need to be aware of the possibility that they have LGBTQ youth in their home. Also be cognizant of the trauma that they may have already experienced before coming to the home due to their identity making it imperative that they create an affirmative environment in the foster care system to avoid retraumatization and one of the other things that should be understood is that the stigma of rejection discrimination and victimization that sexual and gender sense of youth experience contributes to negative mental health outcomes and as social workers we have to be aware of that and be proactive in linking these kids to services.

[00:21:33] So what can social workers offer in this area to meet the challenges related to their current research.

[00:21:39] Social work is a uniquely positioned to understand and address the oftentimes complex issues that young people face. Our understanding of the systems perspectives really does offer a foundation for practice with this population but it does take more than this to engage in competent practice. Social workers must frame their practice with cultural humility never making assumptions about a young person their experiences and being open to empathic learning about youth identities and experiences. In addition it's essential that we approach our work with youth from a trauma informed lens. We know the likelihood is that many youth who have been in the child welfare system and who are experiencing homelessness have experienced past trauma and oftentimes multiple traumas within multiple systems are efforts to assist youth must be aware of this and we should not retraumatize the young person ideally preventing children from entering the child welfare system should be our starting point. A child should not have to enter the child welfare system or experience homelessness because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. But we know that sadly that's not the case today. However social workers can take a lead role in ensuring

that once in care children are placed in homes with welcoming and accepting adults. In addition social work can assist others who come into contact with youth and young adults from addressing the readiness of potential foster parents who want to truly welcome a child into their home to advocating for homeless service providers to practice affirming and trauma informed care.

[00:23:12] So what are some of the practical implications of your research.

[00:23:15] LGBTQ youth were overrepresented in our sample. That's actually similar to findings from previous studies of youth experiencing homelessness. Our results reinforce previous research to indicate that it's common for youth who are LGBTQ to report being kicked out of their home as a primary reason for experiencing homelessness. This is definitely a case for one third of the youth in our study which may indicate more complex challenges presented so often professionals so when they're engaging with families who reject their child based on sexual orientation or gender identity we really have to have the training and the skills to engage families that potentially uncomfortable discussions with families around affirming their identity and meeting the needs of their children. We can't just assume that one child is out of a house that they can't return. I think social workers really need to do our job of engaging with parents or youth irrespective of sexual orientation or gender identity is an experience high rates of individual trauma and exposure to violence in their homes and neighborhoods. This is alarming and again highlights the cumulative trauma that youth in our sample sustain and we found an exorbitant number of youth who have been sexually victimized both as children and while they are homeless. Of particular concern is that more you two are LGBTQ experienced child abuse sexual violence trial and victimization are living on the street compared to heterosexual cisgender all participants having some form of prior child welfare system involvement. Youth who are LGBTQ reported higher rates of physical or sexual revictimization and substance abuse. And this is really a clear indication of the need for targeted interventions to engage youth while they're living on the streets for the same time doing so with a full understanding that many youth consider the street safer than their experiences with surf providers for programs. I think a first step to ensure service providers create spaces for youth who are LGBTQ identified is to evaluate organisational culture and practices. While housing based services and interventions designed specifically for LGBTQ identified youth are few and far between and the availability of best practices is quite limited. Providers should adopt identity affirming practices within a trauma informed practice framework. Youth experiencing homelessness utilize social networks that oftentimes include social media and youth serving agencies can create identity affirming messaging through social media through agency branding and through community outreach.

[00:25:47] There are actually a few overarching contacts that are relevant for discussion in our study. The child welfare system in homes providers and services. Too often each are siloed as separate entities with little acknowledgement of the intersection of each that young people often experience. And the supportive role they play in our lives. Our findings indicate that over half of the youth who are LGBTQ in our study identified a professional contact as a form of social support. We were not able to really understand or know which professions the support of adults identified. It's common for youth who are formerly in foster care to continue contact with and feel support from adults in the child welfare system. I really do think that tells us we have to pay attention to our relationships with these kids when they are in care because it does make a difference how welfare policy advocates are challenged to prevent the pathways to system involvement that begins with the family of origin. We really have to better educate child welfare professionals including foster parents on their critical role in the lives of LGBTQ youth in their care to avoid retraumatization and further victimization of these kids. I think that to do this child welfare system must implement a strategic foster parent training and recruitment to attend to the general well-being of LGBTQ youth in their lives to let them develop life skills well before they age out of foster care. One of the other things that is worth bringing up is the preventing sex trafficking and strengthening families act which was enacted in September 2014. This requires time for the agencies to identify and document

and respond to children in the child welfare system who are risk or who are currently trafficking victims. We look at our findings. Studies suggest that this act is a excellent first step in acknowledging the high rates of sexual victimization among the child welfare system involved youth in order to prevent the trafficking of high risk youth munity partners face challenges of engaging homeless youth and services that are trauma informed child welfare organization homeless service providers. law enforcement are finding many of these youths are victimized on the street. So I think to have one force behind them and at the table would be really important. Also the education system we see how many of the kids did not have high school diploma. I think we all need to work together to develop and implement prevention initiatives to eliminate homelessness among youth in particular youth who are aging out or running away from foster care. You have to be actively engaged in services that address current or past trauma. I don't think we can wait until something happens or there's some event that emerges and the lives of these youth. I think we have to be proactive and get them involved and mental health services and practical activities that develop life skills social skills even job readiness skills ones that help them develop support systems so that they have somebody they can turn to.

[00:28:36] One of the additional points is that we found that 11 percent of the youth who we interviewed were actually eligible to return to care. And so since you can remaining in foster care until the age of 21. And so many of these samples chose to leave foster care. It's important to understand this trend that we need to understand why exactly they've decided to leave care. And what changes need to be made to the system in order to encourage them to remain in care if doing so would mean that they are continuing to live in a supportive and affirming environment.

[00:29:16] So what's next for you folks.

[00:29:18] We plan to continue our collaboration in a couple of different ways. And one of those ways is that this year we're we're actually doing the Atlanta youth count and needs assessment study again. And so we're going to replicate the study but recognizing that we've learned some things about how we could have asked questions differently or changed the methodology to be more inclusive of youth in terms of geographic area. And so this summer we plan on collecting more data.

[00:29:49] Another thing that we are in the process of doing is examining the experiences of sexual and gender minority youth who were previously in the child welfare system. This is more of a qualitative pilot study that we'd like to do and we really want to know more about their experience around their perceptions of safety in the child welfare system. Their perceptions of institutional discrimination are treated by staff and foster parents numbers of placements. We really want to get a better look at their experiences within that child welfare system. And I think that that will provide important information. Especially my work that I do for the child welfare education and training program. We train students to work in the child welfare system and it would be an important piece are talking about trauma and practice and we're talking about changing the way we do things in the child welfare system. I think this would be an important element.

[00:30:48] Hank you for joining us today. Nicholas and Robin. It was a pleasure talking with you.

[00:30:53] Thank you.

[00:30:54] The pleasure being here and we appreciate the opportunity to speak out on a topic that we feel very passionate about.

[00:31:02] You've been listening to Dr. Nicholas Forge and Dr. Robin Hartinger-Saunders discuss the experiences of homeless LGBTQ youth with child welfare involvement. I'm Louanne Bakk.

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