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## “Not Just Being Out on the Streets”: Serving LGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Milwaukee

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“NOT JUST BEING OUT ON THE STREETS”: SERVING LGBTQ+ YOUTH  
EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN MILWAUKEE

by  
Catherine Heady

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
in Geography

at  
The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2022

# ABSTRACT

“NOT JUST BEING OUT ON THE STREETS”: SERVING LGBTQ+ YOUTH  
EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN MILWAUKEE

by

Catherine Heady

The University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, 2022  
Under the Supervision of Professor Anne Bonds, PhD

LGBTQ+ youth homelessness is a pressing topic for geographic study, as LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in youth homeless populations (Cunningham et al. 2014; Morton et al 2018). The conditions that create urban youth homelessness are social, material, and spatial. This research aims to examine service providers’ perspective of the conditions of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Milwaukee. Specifically, I examine how service providers in the city understand LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, where service providers identify barriers and gaps in the city for LGBTQ+ homeless youth, and ways service providers challenge and/or reproduce LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in their care work. Drawing on feminist and queer geographic literature, and informed by feminist care ethics, I conduct qualitative research with participants from four non-profit organizations across Milwaukee. From interviews with these service providers, I employ a thematic analysis of the conditions of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in the city. In this thesis, I argue that service providers understand LGBTQ+ youth homelessness as informed by urban conditions that are reproduced through hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, through the built environment, and through neoliberal logics of care.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Locating Youth Homelessness in Milwaukee

“The biggest thing to me with youth homelessness, when it’s with queer and trans youth, is that it’s so deeply connected most often to ... ‘okay, I come out to my parents, or they find out about something, and I’m on the streets the next day.... what does that mean for me?’

And also, not just being out on the streets. ... Even if folks are offered any sort of time to plan for things,... not being supported is a huge piece of that. ... If you don’t feel as though you’re in a safe environment, because you’re not for whatever reason that may be, then needing to do things like house hop, or couch surf, all of that stuff. And that that’s clearly a piece of the struggle here in Milwaukee.” – Osha, Organization C

I open this thesis with a quote from one of the research participants, Osha, to center the participants’ voices in this work. Osha is a service provider in Milwaukee, Wisconsin at an organization that focuses on public health of LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> people of color in the city. In this quote, they articulate within a few sentences an introduction to this research. They situate a hypothetical youth, vulnerable to homelessness and ask, “what does that mean for me?” (Osha, Organization C). This question speaks to the overall goal of this research: to investigate the conditions of LGBTQ+ youth<sup>2</sup> homelessness in Milwaukee.

Homelessness is often understood as an issue of people, particularly men, sleeping in public places, unable to afford traditional housing because of individual failings. Scholars and activists challenge this essentialist, universal understanding of homeless experiences, pointing to

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term *LGBTQ+* throughout the thesis to refer to those who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, plus (*plus* referring to others who do not identify as straight or cisgender).

<sup>2</sup> In this research, *youth* includes people ages 25 and under.



differences relating to gender, place, age, and more. Geographers examine the spatialization of homelessness and homeless experiences, attending to the structural forces that create outcomes of homelessness, such as social, political, and economic inequalities. To spatialize homelessness is to consider the spatial formation of social activities, material objects, or phenomenon that shape and are shaped by homeless experiences. Speer (2021a) argues that studies of homelessness in geography reveal the importance of looking beyond visible, public spaces to understand homelessness. She states, “work on domesticity and private space reveals how housing itself is deeply imbricated in the politics of homelessness. These insights blur the line between homelessness and precarious housing” (4), bringing attention to a type of homelessness that is more than “rough sleeping” and includes the more invisible practices of surviving housing insecurity and houselessness. Further, the voices of those experiencing homelessness are often erased from narratives in scholarship and policy (Speer 2021a). Erasure and invisibility are a pressing issue for marginalized groups, such as youth in urban spaces (Skelton and Gough 2013). For youth experiencing homelessness, those identifying as LGBTQ+ are overrepresented (Cunningham et al 2014), suggesting a need to investigate the spatialization of age, sexuality, and gender relating to the production of homelessness.

In this chapter, I introduce the issue of youth homelessness and LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Milwaukee by discussing the demographics of homeless youth and limitations of official counts of individuals experiencing homelessness. Next, I contextualize the problem within the city of Milwaukee through a critical discussion of housing and development in the city. I then address the purpose, goals, and limitations of this research project. Finally, I provide an overview of the structure and chapters of thesis.

## *Locating LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness in Milwaukee*

Milwaukee, Wisconsin is a mid-sized, midwestern city in southeastern Wisconsin, located on the shores of Lake Michigan. The city is located on the traditional Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk, and Menominee homeland, and current home of people of the sovereign Anishinaabe, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Mohican, and Oneida nations.<sup>3</sup> According to the United States Census Bureau, the city has a population of 590,157 people. It is a “majority minority” city, and the most segregated in the nation, with about 38% white, 35% Black or African American, 18% Latino. The city is located in Milwaukee County, deeply segregated by race with a population of 945,726 and about 64% white, a much higher percentage of white population than within the city. While the county’s population has about 17% persons in poverty, the city has about 25% persons in poverty. These data begin to illustrate the inequalities between the city and its surrounding suburbs. Discussed in greater detail in the next section, this includes material and social conditions that produce and reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities.

Youth homelessness marks the landscape of Milwaukee. According to The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, in 2020, there are 193 youths in Wisconsin experiencing unaccompanied homelessness.<sup>4</sup> In Milwaukee, homelessness is documented by different agencies, including the Continuum of Care (COC) and Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). MPS indicates that they serve approximately five thousand students a year in their homeless education program.<sup>5</sup> This number is much higher than the number produced by the COC. The COC conducts a Point-In-Time Count twice a year to document the number of people experiencing

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<sup>3</sup> Electa Quinney Institute. (2021). *Land Acknowledgement*. <https://uwm.edu/eqi/about/land-acknowledgement/>

<sup>4</sup> United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. (2021). *Wisconsin Homelessness Statistics*. <https://www.usich.gov/homelessness-statistics/wi/>

<sup>5</sup> Milwaukee Public School Homeless Education Program. (2019). *MPS Homeless Education Program supports students while families seek housing*. Milwaukee Public Schools. <https://mps.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/News/MPS-Homeless-Education-Program-supports-students-while-families-seek-housing.htm>

“literal homelessness” as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).<sup>6</sup> This definition includes people who are without fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residences, specifically those in emergency shelters, shelters provided by charity such as hotel rooms, or public and private spaces that are not intended to be used for sleeping. According to COC’s 2020 Point-in-Time Youth Report there were 55 unaccompanied youth ages twenty-four and under. Of these youth, 43 identified as Black, six as white, two as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and four as multiple races. Sixteen people between 18 and 24 were parents, between them parenting 29 children under the age of eighteen. As far as gender identity, 22 identified as female, 31 identified as male, two as transgender, and zero as nonbinary. In a more recent count conducted on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the COC reports 133 youth under the age of 18, and 54 youth between the ages of 18 and 24, are experiencing literal homelessness. The COC does not document LGBTQ+ identity beyond gender identity. But as Osha points out in the quote above, youth experiencing homelessness may participate in practices such as house hopping or couch surfing, are not counted by COC.

Often described as *invisible* or *hidden* in media, youth experiencing homelessness are undercounted and underserved (Dunne et al 2002). As Osha says, youth experiences of navigating homelessness are “definitely part of the struggle here in Milwaukee,” especially those that identify as LGBTQ+ who are overrepresented in the youth homeless population (Cunningham et al 2014). In a national survey by Morton et al (2018), LGBTQ+ experienced homelessness at twice the rate of heterosexual, cisgender peers, and Black LGBTQ+ youth experienced the highest rates of homelessness. Though documenting gender and race, the COC in Milwaukee does not ask about LGBTQ+ identity. This potentially reproduces a disconnect

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<sup>6</sup>U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (n.d). *Homeless Definition*. [https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HomelessDefinition\\_RecordkeepingRequirementsandCriteria.pdf](https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HomelessDefinition_RecordkeepingRequirementsandCriteria.pdf)

between homeless services and LGBTQ+ services in the city, despite an evident need for such (Ecker 2016; Morton et al 2018). Meanwhile, youth navigate a city where there is often a lack of support for their needs, such as health care, jobs, housing, or affirmation for LGBTQ+ identities.

### ***Contextualizing Milwaukee: Social and Built Urban Environments***

Youth in Milwaukee experiencing homelessness are impacted by the conditions and structures of the city that shape housing, public space, and transportation. While work on youth homelessness can focus spaces of home and family relationships (Gibson 2011), there is also a need to examine how young people are situated across different spaces and scales, such as spaces throughout the city. This thesis considers youth in Milwaukee as they navigate the segregated city and its uneven social and built environment. Youth are not only experiencing homelessness, but racism, transphobia, and homophobia that impacts access to housing, jobs, health care, and public space. In Milwaukee, these structures are shaped by decentralization, suburbanization, capitalism, racism and neoliberalism.

Conditions of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness are shape by social and built environments. Milwaukee's built environment consist of uneven geographies of housing, public space, transportation, and other material characteristics relating to processes of racialized suburbanization and decentralization. The origins of Milwaukee's decentralization were created by the city's prewar socialist political leadership to implement a spatial ordering and address material conditions of congested urban environments (McCarthy 2006; Platt 2010). The postwar era in Milwaukee is characterized by suburbanization, including white flight, and racialized investment and disinvestment (Loyd and Bonds 2018; Bonds 2018). Practices to create a segregated city, such as racial housing covenants, blockbusting, and exclusionary zoning

restricted the mobility of Black residents “to a narrow, northward trajectory, contained by the city’s urban boundary and surrounded by the almost exclusively white suburbs in the so-called WOW counties of Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington” (Loyd and Bonds 2018, 906). Urban decentralization shifted opportunities to suburban regions instead of centralized, urban locations. Coupled with deindustrialization, decentralization negatively impacted Milwaukee’s working class as accessibility to jobs decreased for populations in low-status areas of the city (Ottenseman 1980), especially along lines of race (Bonds 2018; Boardman and Field 2002). A result of these processes includes increased poverty levels in Milwaukee (Loyd and Bonds 2018). With increased poverty comes greater risk for insecurities, such as housing insecurity which may lead to homelessness. However, these risks are not equally distributed across the city.

Historical trends inform contemporary spatial configurations of the city. Bonds (2018) situates Milwaukee’s neighborhoods within structures of racial capitalism and carceral urbanism, in which property is a tool to create and maintain race in Milwaukee. While suburbanization and whiteness work to diminish their access to urban resources, “low-income neighborhoods of color, like those in Milwaukee...are subject to ongoing surveillance and routine police contact in the name of public safety and neighborhood improvement” (Bonds 2018, 7). Today Milwaukee is considered one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States, with racial and ethnic segregation between Black and white and Latino households (Levine 2020; 2016). The racialized outcomes of segregation processes are evident in Milwaukee’s landscape, as Levine (2020) documents the impact of racism on Black employment, education, health, and incarceration. He argues Milwaukee “represents the archetype of modern day metropolitan racial apartheid and inequality” as “no metropolitan area ranks as consistently poorly, across the board, on indicators of Black community well-being as does Milwaukee” (Levine 2020, 4). The

connection between spaces, resources, and policing and surveillance, are essential aspects of the production of youth homelessness. Desmond (2012) considers the racialized outcomes of evictions in Milwaukee, impacting precarity and housing insecurity for Milwaukee's Black residents. As the data from Milwaukee COC shows, Black youth are overrepresented in the city's homeless population, a result of structural racism and inequalities reproduced through urban policies and planning that value some spaces and people, primarily white people, over others.

In terms of the state as an actor in urban spatialization, urban planning and development policies are largely informed by the neoliberal logics that rose to prominence in American cities over the past few decades. These policies impact the accessibility of resources for LGBTQ+ youth and youth experiencing homelessness in the city. Neoliberalism, the philosophy that values free market and limited government intervention in the economy, informed urban politics and structures as federal support for cities shrank and smaller, local actors bore responsibility for resources. As Harvey (1989) describes, local city governments, in the shift from the Keynesian Welfare State to rollbacks of neoliberalism, focused on entrepreneurialism. Harvey argues cities must now focus their resources on attracting business, rather than social support for residents. This shapes policy as well as material urban environments. Ward (2007) considers major actors in Milwaukee's urban development, including business elites and state officials who shape the planning of the city. He describes revitalization in the city as "cool for some, ...but not for most" (p. 802). Rather, planning and urban policy lay the foundations for displacement. Hashimoto (2020) explicitly discusses the racial logics that inform Milwaukee's development. She argues that development, though crafted through a colorblind lens, is actually dependent on and reproduces racial hierarchy in the city. She demonstrates how discourses of city officials "[construct] the 'successful' part of Milwaukee as comprised of amenities and the built

environment whereas the ‘failing’ part seems to have endemic structural problems that prevent it from enjoying the amenities” (Hashimoto 2020, p. 538). These conditions create cities that support the lives and needs of the wealthy, rather than the city’s vulnerable, while allowing for the naturalization of these outcomes. In other words, there is a failure to recognize the ways in which unequal conditions are not inevitable but are actually actively produced and maintained through hierarchies (Hashimoto 2020; Bonds 2018; Loyd and Bonds 2018). Resources directed to the wealthy create a lack for those in insecure positions, such as homeless youth.

In addition to housing and public space, transportation systems are a key element of the city’s built environment which reproduce uneven geographies of access to city spaces. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Milwaukee’s Black neighborhoods underwent the violence of urban renewal and highway construction (Loyd and Bonds 2018), destroying Black homes to give white suburbanites access to the city’s center and amenities. Although activist resistance left some freeways unbuilt (Rodriguez 2016), displacement still took place. Further, policies favoring cars over public transportation continue to impact the ability of Milwaukee’s residents to move through the city. A study of transit-dependent populations in Milwaukee analyzed the impact of service cuts between 2001 and 2014 on access to employment (Rast 2015). Rast defines those who are transit-dependent as “people who rely on public transportation because the costs of purchasing and maintaining an automobile are prohibitively expensive or because they do not possess valid driver’s licenses” (4). This study indicates that there is a lack of public transportation in many suburban areas, limiting the people who can access jobs or other services in these areas. In addition to accessing jobs, youth need access to education, health services, home, and other spaces; transportation between these spaces is a key element of everyday urban experiences for youth, especially those without cars.

The characteristics of Milwaukee's social and built environments discussed above illustrate the context of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in the city. Within this landscape of decentralization and neoliberalism, LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness must navigate barriers and gaps to access services needed to survive. Further, service providers must exist within this landscape to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ homeless youth. With this context in mind, I now turn to the goals of this research project and the structure of the thesis.

### *Understanding LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness: Structure of Thesis*

In this thesis, I examine the perspective of service providers, and how they understand LGBTQ+ youth experiences of homelessness as shaped by spatialized hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, the built environment, and neoliberal logics of care. My research is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do service providers in the city understand LGBTQ+ youth homelessness?
2. Where do service providers identify barriers and gaps in the city for LGBTQ+ homeless youth?
3. In what ways do service providers challenge and/or reproduce LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in their care work?

I first develop a theoretical framework and methodology that draws from feminist and queer urban geographies and existing scholarship on urban homelessness. In Chapter 2, I outline the theoretical framework and methods of the research, which are built from the insights of feminist and queer geographic scholarship that address gendered urban environments, queer urban space, and feminist care ethics. This framework situates urban spaces and places as social and material,



which allows me to investigate homelessness as something that has social and physical spatial components. Moreover, the framework of intersectionality allows me to view identities and oppressions as coexisting within urban space, framing homelessness as an issue connected to gender, sexuality, race, and class. Further, feminist care ethics provide an overarching ethic to employ in analysis as well as research practices. This ethic positions the researcher and participants as situated and relational. This is manifested in different ways throughout this research. In my analysis, the ethic of care is used to examine how service providers practice care within the neoliberal logics that shape their organizations and the production of homelessness. In my research practices, the ethic of care situates me, the researcher, and research participants as relational and embodied beings within structures of power and privilege.

Drawing from eight interviews with service providers in the city, I analyze the perception of Milwaukee's landscape and boundaries, situating youth within processes that lead to housing insecurity and homelessness. These processes are embedded in structures of housing, employment, education, and healthcare and marked by inequalities of social difference. In Chapter 3, I discuss the urban conditions that produce LGBTQ+ youth homelessness and argue that these structures produce and reproduce youth homelessness in Milwaukee. Further, I draw connections between these structures and social oppressions, specifically homophobia, transphobia, and racism. I argue that these intersecting oppressions mark the conditions producing LGBTQ+ homelessness.

Next, I argue that inequalities are reproduced by the Milwaukee's uneven built environment in which place and mobility are connected to opportunities. In Chapter 4, I focus on Milwaukee's urban spaces and built environments and demonstrate how material spaces are connected to social conditions. Based on the data from the interviews with service providers, I

discuss the uneven geographies across the city, including perceptions of different places and youth mobility in the city. These perceptions and experiences are shaped by understandings of racism, transphobia, and homophobia in the city, which impact LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness.

Finally, I discuss how service providers provide care to youth through neoliberal logics which, despite the intentions of the service providers, do not challenge the structures that produce homelessness. In Chapter 5, I examine the nonprofit organizations that serve youth experiencing homelessness and LGBTQ+ youth in the city. I examine the organizations as spaces of care for LGBTQ+, and how care practices center identity and fluidity. I then situate these organizations within the structures of neoliberal urban care landscapes. I examine how these organizations operate within these structures and the impact these structures have on care.

I conclude by reflecting on this research and its potential contribution to discussions of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness. I also discuss this research as limited, partial, and situated. I suggest that future research and policy must include youth voice and participation to better conceptualize experiences of homelessness.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Examining LGBTQ+ Youth Geographies of Homelessness: Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

#### *Introduction*

When considering homelessness, one might immediately think of spaces and places, such as shelters, streets, and parks. It is no question that homelessness is a deeply spatial problem. Further, it is a problem that marks the personal, lived, embodied, and everyday experiences of urban space. Speer (2021a) states “to experience homelessness is to face the profoundly spatial problem having no safe, stable place in the world” (1). Access to safety and stability in urban environments is impacted by the social hierarchies and structures that produce homelessness. For LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness in Milwaukee, experiences are marked by intersecting identities and placements. To examine the issue of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, I engage with critical geographic scholarship, particularly feminist and queer scholarship, and feminist care ethics. This framework and methods allow me to analyze homelessness as a spatialized issue in Milwaukee.

In this chapter, I develop my theoretical framework through a discussion of literature from the fields of feminist and queer urban geographies and feminist care ethics in geography. LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness are situated within complex intersections of identities, social hierarchies, political and economic processes. Critical geographic literatures provide frameworks to investigate how these factors and processes are spatialized. I first discuss feminist urban geographies, which center gender and difference in the production of urban space. In addition, I discuss intersectionality as a framework to further spatialize identities in urban

environments. I then turn to geographic approaches to homelessness, which spatialized homelessness and situate homelessness within capital accumulation and the social relations of capitalism. Next, I document literature of queer and LGBTQ+ youth geographies, which position young people within complex intersections identity and space. Drawing on these frameworks, I can analyze youth homelessness in Milwaukee as it is tied to structural oppressions, such as homophobia, transphobia, and racism. Further, I can analyze the built environment of Milwaukee as it is shaped by and shapes social relations and values. Finally, I discuss feminist care ethics which inform the conceptualization of urban care and guide the practices of care while conducting research. Care is central to this research project, as I conduct research during the years 2019 to 2021, in which uncertainty and unrest were at the forefront of global conversations. Following my discussion of the literature, I outline my research design and methods, which are informed by feminist and queer insights.

### ***Conceptualizing the City: Feminist Urban Geographies***

In this section, I first discuss feminist urban geography, a critical approach to human geography. Feminist geographers theorize and engage with the spatialization of social experiences, conceptualizing spaces as embedded with power relations and difference, particularly along lines of gender (Longhurst 2000; Doan 2010) and other forms of intersectional difference such as race and class (Gilmore 2002; McKittrick 2006). While there are many approaches to studying urban problems such as homelessness, feminist geographers examine how this issue is spatialized and grounded and is reproduced in urban space. This includes investigating the gendered impacts meanings of homelessness, embodiments of homelessness, and experiences of homelessness (Klodawsky 2006, 2009; Parker 2011; Kern 2019).

Feminist urban theory challenges hegemonic representations of the urban, as it is grounded in the everyday, emphasizing knowledge and knowledge production as situated within specific social and geographic contexts (Longhurst 2001; Peake 2016). Feminist geographers center gender, seeking to understand connections between experiences of gender and urban space, the relationship between the social and the spatial, and the production of differences and inequalities (Bondi and Rose 2003, 2010; Kern 2019). Feminist urban scholars argue that gender operates in various ways in the city, relating to identity and experience, social and spatial organization, and performativity (Bondi and Rose 2003). The city is a site for the production of gender roles and identity (Bondi and Rose 2003; Kern 2019). For example, Parker (2011) documents geographic research that indicates that women's voices are marginalized in decisions of urban policies, restructuring, and development. Another example of urban reproductions of gender is the unpaid labor, often focuses on care work, that falls on the shoulders of women in cities (Parker 2016). Therefore, urban phenomena have a gendered component that must be considered for a fuller understanding of urban space. Moreover, early feminist geographers argue the city is a site of disadvantage for women, manifesting in markets, public policy, violence, and access to services (Bondi 1998). For example, Marxists feminists and feminists working in the tradition of political economy (FPE) focus especially on social reproductive labor, the often unpaid, undervalued caring labor disproportionality carried out by women, especially women of color, that is essential to sustaining capitalist relations (Werner et al, 2018; Parker, 2016; Meehan and Strauss, 2015; Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2012).

These insights from feminist urban geographic scholarship are valuable for this research project. First, this research lays the foundation for the need to consider embodied differences, such as gender, as operating within space with material outcomes. For example, Parker's (2011)

material feminist framework is “attentive to embodiment, encompassing of intersectionalities, focused on the everyday along with broader processes, and committed to ethical practice” (442). It provides the tools to draw connections between the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, structures such as housing practices, and the built environment of Milwaukee. In other words, as feminist geographers argue that urban space upholds patriarchal social organizations, the experiences of youth, especially those who are women, transgender, or gender-nonconforming, need to be examined. I employ this framework in my research and analysis by drawing attention to gender and identity as it relates to urban experiences such as accessing housing and space in Milwaukee.

Moreover, contexts of neoliberalism and the spatialization of neoliberal logics should be understood as gendered processes (Dyck 2005; Bondi and Laurie 2005; Peake 2016) with outcomes based on intersectional gendered differences. Early feminist work examined urban and suburban, private and public spaces as sites of social reproduction (Mackenzie and Rose 1983; Bondi and Rose 2003). Neoliberalism and spaces of labor production are embedded in the city, through private and public spaces, in urban environments that uphold and value capitalism and devalue everyday labor of care. Further, feminists recognize the dichotomies of urban and rural, public and private, male and female, as “ideals rather than reality, yet ideals with “power in shaping material lives” (Laliberte, Derickson, and Dowler 2010). In other words, the systems that shape the everyday have material outcomes, but the categorization and boundaries of these spatialized processes is blurred in lived experiences. This approach to understanding urban environments is essential when considering geographies of homelessness, where conceptions of “home” may challenge hegemonic understandings of these spaces. bell hooks (1981), for example, provides an articulation of “homespaces” that transcend boundaries of public and private, centering the individual and one’s ability to create spaces of home. Youth, especially

LGBTQ+ experiencing homelessness may also create spaces of home that challenge traditional conceptual spaces of home. Further, the spatialization of urban experiences are marked by intersecting experiences of multiple identities beyond gender. Feminist conceptualizations of neoliberalism, which reframe work and labor to include care work, make it possible to engage service providers as complicated actors in the production of youth homelessness. For example, care models such as “Housing First” involve placing people into regulated “homes” and uphold existing capitalist structures (Klodawsky 2009). These insights shape my research as I examine the position of service providers in Milwaukee and their roles in providing care but also upholding neoliberal systems of care and hegemonic understandings of concepts such as housing and work.

Social oppressions exist across identities of gender, race, sexuality, class, ability, and more, and are interconnected across spaces. Feminist urban geography has been critiqued for overemphasizing voices and perspectives of white, middle-class women (Parker 2016, Bonds 2020). For example, early investigations of the spatial arrangements of the city (Hayden 1980) centered middle class, heterosexual experiences (Bondi and Rose 2003). Historically, anti-racist scholarship has not been centered in the field of geography (Kobayashi 2014), which itself was founded on mapping difference and hierarchy (Kobayashi and Peake 2000). With Black feminist scholars fighting for space and place (Mollett and Faira 2018) in the field and in the academy, it is essential to understand that the urban is gendered as well as racialized. Engaging with research in fields such as Black Geographies, with thematic areas such as space making, racial capitalism, carceral geographies, and racism (Hawthorne 2019), is beneficial when examining topics such as racial capitalism, carceral urbanism, and the connections between racial violence and political and economic governance (Melamed 2015; Bonds 2018). Moreover, scholars in the field of

Black Geographies challenge knowledge formations by focusing on Black subjects and places, and the ways that these subjects and places create agency and space, rather than suggesting that Black people are lacking or victims of geography and are instead world-makers (Eaves 2017; Hawthorne 2019). Structures of privilege and oppression based on gender and race as well as class, ability, age, and sexuality do not exist independently of one another, and exist in complicated ways across space. Thus, the analytical framework of intersectionality has been frequently deployed by feminist researchers in geography and beyond to conceptualize the experiences of social differences. In this research project, I draw attention to the ways that Milwaukee's racialized geographies of housing and employment are an essential component of the production of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in the city.

To analyze the multiple facets of identity that relate to urban space, I draw from insights from geographers' use of intersectionality. The framework of intersectionality was developed by Crenshaw (1989) to examine questions of racial inequality, particularly the experiences of Black women. Crenshaw argues that Black women's experiences of sexism and patriarchy in employment are also informed by racism, and therefore differ from the experiences of white women. Crenshaw (1993) demonstrates how intersectionality can be used to examine the complexity of women's shelters in Los Angeles, revealing the connections and implications of larger social structures such as immigration law and mass incarceration to violence against women. Feminist geographers often use an intersectional framework to understand and critique the connections between identities as well as location and place (Hopkins 2018). Mollett and Faira (2018) argue that intersectionality is inherently spatial; in their words, "the interlocking violence of racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and capitalism constitute a spatial formation" (p. 566). Within an urban setting, violence result in a spatial formation with particular outcomes



for vulnerable populations, such as LGBTQ+ youths and youth of color experiencing homelessness. In other words, as Milwaukee's urban spaces are impacted by forces that aim to uphold white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and capitalism, those who are oppressed by these forces experience such oppression within spatial contexts. In this research, I understand LGBTQ+ youth homelessness not just a problem of being without a home because of sexual oppression, but also a problem of racism, transphobia, homophobia, and classism with material, spatial outcomes.

### ***Geographic Approaches to Urban Homelessness***

Spatializing urban homelessness involves examining the spatial forms of the social, material, and processes that are involved in homeless experiences. Geographers understand homelessness as a spatial problem, and have examined homelessness as it relates to private, institutional, and public spaces (Speer 2021a). The categorizations and understandings of these spaces are “fluid and overlapping” (Speer 2021a, 1) as experiences of homelessness are situated and unfixed. As Speer (2021b) argues, contemporary definitions, understandings, and accounts of homelessness do not center the voices of those who experience it. While geographers document the structures that produce homelessness and its outcomes, this knowledge is incomplete.

Feminist geographers argue that experiences of homelessness are marked by intersectional, gendered urban experiences. Feminist urban scholars study topics relating to homelessness such challenging representations of homelessness, and gendered meanings and embodiments of being without a home (Parker 2011; Kern 2019). Klodawsky's (2006) work provides an overview of gender and homelessness in Canada and other Western contexts. In this

work, Klodawsky argues for research examining bodies and urban space while considering politics of scale and difference, questioning why “being housed has been naturalized while being homeless has either been rendered invisible or categorized as ‘other’” (Klodawsky 2006, 378). In other words, she argues that homelessness occurs within a context of social structures, state policies, and governance, resulting in difference in outcomes and access that renders some experiences of homeless as visible and some as invisible. May, Cloke, and Johnsen (2007) identify different homeless women’s experiences and argue that the occurrence of women’s homelessness is vastly underestimated. Further, Klodawsky (2009) addresses homelessness and rights to the city. Her analysis focuses on the role of neoliberalization of the sociospatial landscape of the city. Drawing on the work of Fraser, Graefe, and Purcell, Klodawsky argues that among marginalized groups, there are gendered differences in causes of homelessness as well as reactions to social care landscapes, such as Housing First models that are highly regulated and surveilled (Klowdasky 2009).

Geographers working outside of feminist approaches, such as those grounded in a Marxist, political economic tradition, tend to emphasize homelessness in urban environments as it relates social relations to capitalism and uneven urban development. For example, Mitchell (2011) defines homelessness not as an individual’s experience, but “rather it names a social condition, a set of social relations that are as much about the structures of housed society as they are about how society understands those who lack shelter. In other words, to speak of ‘homelessness’ is to speak of how social relations are organized” (933). Therefore, structures such as economic systems, housing systems, and social hierarchies produce homelessness in cities. Documenting the historical geography of contemporary homelessness, Mitchell indicates that homelessness has been structurally produced in the United States by the conditions of labor

markets, the dismantling of the welfare state, and housing policies. More specifically, this includes the deregulatory practices of neoliberalism, which influence urban spaces and practices (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002; Bondi and Laurie 2005). As previously mentioned, Klodawsky (2006) details how feminist geographers intervene to examine the gendered components of the production of homelessness, such as the visibility of men's homelessness and more hidden nature of women's homelessness, as well as discourses of gendered labor and urban space relate to the production of homelessness (Klodawsky 2009).

Within these neoliberal urban contexts, geographers have examined the spatialization of homelessness with particular attention to urban spaces, and how people are active in creating space in urban environments. For example, Rosenberg (2020) documents the placemaking of Black queer and trans homeless youth in Toronto's gay urban enclave. As Speer (2021a) states, "geographers are increasingly moving beyond simplistic tropes of neoliberal urbanism, instead engaging theories of the urban assemblage and performativity to interrogate the complex relationship between unhoused people and the urban sphere." (9). Public space such as streets, historical public spaces, parks, and libraries have been examined as places where people experience homelessness seek and create place (Hodgetts et al., 2008; Sheehan, 2010; Koprowska et al. 2020). Further, politics and spaces of resistance are formed in spaces such as homeless encampments (Rowe and Wolch 1990; Sparks 2010; Speer 2018; Dozier 2019).

Critical geographical scholarship also examines the criminalization of homelessness and decentralization of homeless services, giving rise to complex geographies of survival through the invention of strategies to cope with neoliberal conditions (Mitchell and Heynen 2009). Such conditions include the dismantling of The United States' welfare systems, the privatization of public services and spaces, and the focus of local governments on entrepreneurship. Survival

strategies are deployed in a landscape of public and private spaces, relating to the ordering of urban space through structural regulation, as well as discourses of right to the city. Public space is especially regulated through laws that define acceptable behavior within those spaces, aimed at removing from those spaces those participating in unacceptable behaviors, such as people experiencing homelessness (Mitchell 1997). Concurrently, public space itself is increasingly privatized through barriers and boundaries that impact people's ability to occupy urban space and interact with others within such spaces, as well as architecture and designs that discourage people from sitting or sleeping in public spaces (Mair 1986). Increased policing and the carceral urbanism impact the ability for homeless people to exist in urban space (Dozier 2019). Youth, especially homeless queer and youth of color are at risk for policing, criminalization, and violence in public space (Rosenberg 2017).

The scholarship mentioned above highlights the connections between the social, political, and economic conditions that inform the outcomes of homelessness in the United States, as well as feminist interventions. The built environment of cities reflects the revanchist policies, surveillance of urban space and contributes to the criminalization of homelessness and impacting the survival strategies of those experiencing homelessness and those providing services. These outcomes are informed by experiences of differences along lines of gender, race, sexuality, and age. Feminist geographers challenge understandings of urban spaces and experiences, particularly the definition and characterization of homelessness in urban environments.

### ***Queer Urban Geographies and LGBTQ+ Youth Geographies***

Queer approaches to geography demonstrate the complexity of conceptualizing spaces, bodies, and identities. Feminist geographers often take on queer approaches to geography to

better challenge normative understandings of gender, sexualities, and spaces. As the acronym LGBTQ+ consists of a variety of gender and sexual identities, it is important to call into question how this representation is complex and contested, and how sexualities and genders are spatialized. In relation to homelessness, particularly youth homelessness, it is essential to challenge the hegemonic representations of urban spaces and experiences. In this section, I discuss queer geographies and queer urban geographic studies.

Geographers engaging with queer geographies take on the task of challenging essentialist categories and understandings of places, spaces, bodies, genders, sex, and sexualities. Developed from postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives to sexuality and space studies (Knopp 2007), queer geography is an approach used to challenge the binaries and hegemonic representations within and of spaces. There is a connection between LGBTQ identities and queer geographies, as research in queer geographies often centers sex and sexuality. However, “LGBTQ+” and “queer” are not interchangeable terms, as *queer* may refer to an identity as well as a perspective or way of knowing (Johnston 2016b). Johnston notes that some geographers question the application of queer theory to “real” places and people, especially in terms of day-to-day situations and struggles (Johnston 2016b). Specifically, this draws attention to the way categories, such as genders and sexualities, are used to understand abuses, violence, and harassment and are essential for political projects or collective action and change (Knopp 2007; Johnston 2016b). However, queer theory is useful in that it allows geographers to spatialize identities and challenge categories as they are applied across spaces (Johnston 2016b). Moreover, as transgender geographies are often marginalized within the field, work in queer and trans geographies can be used to explore gender diversity and its connections to privilege and oppression (Johnston 2016a) in cities.

As mentioned, queer theory emerged from sexuality and space studies. Early studies of the geographic contexts of sexualities emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasizing urban space and gay villages, also called the “gayborhood” (Hubbard 2018; Brown 2014). Urban LGBTQ enclaves played a role in community building, support, and political organization, especially for gay men (Brown 2014); at the same time, these spaces of gay inclusion have been documented as spaces of exclusion and resistance for lesbians, transgender folks, and people of color (Doan 2007; Brown 2014; Rosenburg 2017; Rosenburg 2020). These observations prompted a shift away from focusing on LGBTQ enclaves to instead to the ways in which bodies, places and spaces are fluid, ambiguous, and contradictory (Johnston 2016b).

The shift in focus is made evident by research of lesbian geographies in the 1990s, such as Bell et al. (1994) and Bell and Valentine (1995), which drew attention to queer spatial theories of desire (Johnston 2016b). Giesecking’s (2016) work on lesbian and queer women in New York discusses the unfixed nature of lesbian territories and borders, and movement between these spaces. Giesecking relates bodies to the spatial, as lesbian and queer women move between spaces, create their own territories and boundaries, which are made and unmade across space and time. Importantly, this work connects intersecting identities of sexuality, race, class, and gender, as these identities contradict and challenge the spaces that are occupied and borders that are crossed. Giesecking argues that it is through these means that lesbians create urban space, not through property ownership or economic territorialization in LGBTQ neighborhoods. He states “LGBTQ neighbourhoods and districts have experienced and/or supported other trends common to neoliberal cities that disproportionately affect women who possess lower incomes, visibility and political power. For women of colour and poor women, these experiences are even more magnified” (Giesecking 2016, 268) situating queer folks within larger neoliberal urban trends.

Further, this work points to a queering of mapping itself, in that spaces and places are documented beyond traditional methods tied to traditional political and economic boundaries.

Queer marginalization exists within complex geographies of social and special oppression among intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Goh 2018). Black queer geographers, such as Eaves (2017) push back against the whiteness of queer scholarship. Eaves argues, “Black geographies are not always cartographically inscribed. In other words, using Black Geographies as a theoretical and empirical framework requires expanding our understanding of “validity” in geographic research” (Eaves 2017, 85). Therefore, *queering* involves challenging the whiteness of the field and knowledge production. Michael Brown (2012) argues that truly queering geographies of sexualities involves considering other aspects of identity, and he considers the use of intersectionality as a framework to pursue this task. However, Brown notes that in the context of queer geographies, its use is considered uneven, with much literature focusing on intersections of sexuality, sex, and gender. Further, there are arguments against intersectionality as a framework; these arguments suggest that the framework incorrectly separates and essentializes categories such as “race” and “sexuality” (Brown 2012). This speaks again to the complexity of *queering* as a task, as many feminists argue that these categories are needed to reveal oppressions and privileges relating to difference.

Addressing difference in urban environments includes considering age, specifically youth and youth experiences. Young people and children are urban dwellers with unique experiences, perceptions, and occupancy of urban space that often goes unnoticed. Specifically, Evans (2008) calls for research that focuses on teenagers and young people and their role in making space. Although they are present and active in shaping urban space, they are marginalized in the spatial politics of the city, including policy making and planning (Skelton and Gough 2013). Research

also calls attention to youth and young adulthood as a time of transition and movement between childhood and adulthood (Valentine 2003; Evans 2008). Feminist geographers have been giving attention to children and youth, often drawing connections between gender and gendered power relations (O'Neill Gutierrez and Hopkins 2015). Feminist research on youth often focuses on challenging marginality, empowering participants in research, and conducting research that is ethically sensitive and nuanced (O'Neill Gutierrez and Hopkins 2015), such as use of participatory research methods (Cahill 2007). Cahill (2007) argues that there is not enough research on youth, their everyday lives, and their perspective, especially queer and trans youth.

LGBTQ+ youth are receiving growing attention in geographic research, although many researchers indicate that there is a need for more. It is especially important to consider LGBTQ+ youth in processes of knowledge production (De Montigny and Podmore 2014) and not just through an adultist lens or a framework that only considers LGBTQ+ youth as vulnerable. Schroeder (2012) exemplifies the complex relationship between LGBTQ+ youth and their adult advocates; while adults may have intentions of supporting youth, they could create spaces for youth that are embedded with contradictions of safety and insecurity. Schroeder's (2015) work again demonstrates the fluidity of youth space and the need to include LGBTQ+ youth voice to understand the complexities of youth geographies. Further, Rosenberg (2020) demonstrates how LGBTQ+ youth, specifically trans youth and youth of color, who are experiencing homelessness create spaces of resistance within spaces of exclusion. Irazábal and Huerta (2016) use an intersectional lens to show the activist work of LGBTQ+ youth within the realm of urban planning and demonstrate how youth call attention to housing systems that do not support their needs. As literature of queer and LGBTQ+ geographies continue to grow, youth voice is central to the work to challenge traditional processes of knowledge production.



As I have discussed feminist and queer geographies, including LGBTQ+ youth geographies, I now turn to the topic of feminist care ethics, which provide a guide for this research's goals and practices.

### *Careful City: Feminist Care Ethics in Urban Geographies of Homelessness*

As geographers aim to address the spatializations of people, structures, and material arrangements, an approach to understanding politics is needed. One such approach is “care,” centering the relationships between people and the embodiment of caring. Feminist care ethics are guiding principles that center the idea that people are embodied and relational (Williams 2017). This approach was put forth by Gilligan, who's work stems from research in the field of psychology that centered men and masculine approaches to decision-making and reason (Koggel and Orme 2010); Gilligan instead put forth a feminist approach, grounded in the importance of context, relationships, and responsibility between oneself and others (Koggel and Orme 2010). A definition of care ethics comes from Fischer and Tronto (1990) based on feminist theory; care ethics involve the everyday practices acted for oneself or others which promote the maintenance and repair of the world so that people may live well (Wiesel et al. 2020; Williams 2017). Ethics are the morals and principles that guide one's actions, and practices are the actions involving the care of self and of others. Fisher and Tronto identify four elements of care and underlying moral qualities: caring about (attentiveness), caring for (responsibility), care giving (competence), and responsiveness (care receiving) (Fischer and Tronto 1990, Tronto 1993, cited in Lopez 2019). Tronto (2013) adds a fifth element, caring with, to addresses the connections between people in care relationships, requiring plurality and respect (Lopez 2015).

Geographers have engaged with an ethic of care to examine how care is spatialized, examining how care is relational between people and also between people and places. Lawson (2007) argues, “Care ethics focuses our attention on the social and how it is constructed through unequal power relationships, but it also moves us beyond critique and toward the construction of new forms of relationships, institutions, and action that enhance mutuality and well-being” (8). This approach situates the researcher within the power relations and institutions that shape research questions, practices, and other work. Care ethics emerge from particular, situated contexts and are highly geographic (Lawson 2007). Lawson argues for geographers to engage with care as neoliberalization creates new geographies of poverty and inequality, impacting who needs access to care (Laliberte, Derickson, and Dowler 2010). Current urban geographic care research has addressed themes including locations of care, materialities of care, and subjects of care (Power and Williams 2020). Morrow and Parker (2020) discuss interventions of care in cities, starting with a discussion of Hayden’s (1982) *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, which documents urban changes from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Such interventions reconceptualizes the spaces and scales of social reproductive labor; care was taking place beyond private spaces and by collective labor, rather than individuals. As materialist feminists, Morrow and Parker emphasize the role of the built environment and infrastructure in supporting care in cities, suggesting interventions that would move care activities from private to public spaces.

Within urban landscapes, the subjects, practitioners, and spaces of care are impacted by power relations, inequalities, policies, and the built environment. Geographers have researched the relationships between care and race (Raghuram 2019), disability (Kröger 2009), age and homelessness (Wood et al. 2020; Kloudasky et al 2006). In addition, there has been work that situates care within the neoliberal context of the United States, including a privatized healthcare

system and assumptions of who is responsible for care and deserving of care (Lopez 2018) This work discusses and critiques neoliberal logics of care that makes care work the responsibility of the individual and small-scale actors (Lopez 2018). Further, geographers argue for research that engages with intersectionality, and the intersection of differences to better understand the complexity of care (Hankivsky 2014, Hamington 2015, Raghuram 2019). In relation to homelessness, geographers investigate “spaces of care”, especially as they relate to neoliberalization and power (Speer 2021a). Speer identifies spaces of care as sites of complicated relationships between those receiving care, those giving care, and the overarching political systems that shape experiences of homelessness. For example, Speer describes shelters as “subject to a politics of NIMBYism and workers often reinforce tropes about homelessness as a personal failure to be solved through therapy and coercion” (7). Other sites of care, such as LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations, have been critiqued for criminalizing queer and Black youth (Rosenburg 2017). It is therefore essential to engage with care spaces in a way that is critical, as these are spaces of contestations between different actors and forces.

As discussed in more detail in the next section, the methodology of this research project considers the positionality of the researcher, the voice of research participants, and care as a research practice to address the research questions.

### ***Research Methods: Qualitative Research in Pandemic Times***

Through this research, I aim to investigate LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Milwaukee through the perspective of service providers who work with LGBTQ+ youth and youth experiencing homelessness. I also aim to contribute to growing discussions of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in field of critical geography, especially feminist and queer urban studies. To

conduct this research, I engage with methods informed by the work of feminist and queer geographers. Feminist geographers often chose to analyze the urban at the scale of households, bodies, and neighborhoods using qualitative, reflexive methods that include ongoing contact with research subjects and participants (Parker 2016). Specifically, I use qualitative analysis to examine the conditions of Milwaukee's urban environment that contribute to the production of youth homelessness in the city and explore how young people experiencing homelessness navigate the city. My research questions and methods are guided by calls within the field to "[challenge] epistemic erasure and [refine] existing understandings of the concept of homelessness" (Speer 2021a, 12) by considering youth who are not represented in "official" counts of homelessness in the city and approaching homelessness as a spatialized concept that exists in tangent with intersecting social oppressions.

Moreover, this research is guided by calls within the fields to center care (Lawson 2007) as a principle that situates research within relationships between the researcher and participants. As a researcher, I am situated within the structures of the neoliberal academy, and I conducted research during the Covid-19 pandemic (between 2019 and 2021) and racial justice demonstrations in the summer of 2020, impacting me and research participants. These global events shaped this research in many ways, drawing attention to pressing inequalities in the world and shaping the everyday geographies of myself and participants. Within the field of geography there is a call for "slow scholarship" (Mountz et al 2015; Caretta and Faira 2020) that brings attention to the impact of neoliberal constraints on work of academic researchers. The feminist care ethics put forth by the proponents of slow scholarship emphasize the importance of care and self-care in work of academics and as resistance to neoliberal structures. Loyd et al. (forthcoming) examine slow scholarship within the context of crisis, specifically the pandemic

and racial justice demonstrations of 2020. They reflect on the relationship between the impacts of these global events on research practices, including the challenges of everyday, embodied experiences of graduate student life during this time. My research was greatly impacted by the pandemic and racial justice uprisings of 2020, as discussed in more detail below.

Finally, this research is shaped by ongoing practices of reflexivity as the project and its participants shifted across time and space. This practice, though not without critique (Kobayashi 2003), is useful in positioning the researcher within the research, bringing attention to the power dynamics of the research (Hopkins and Pain 2007). As a researcher, practicing reflexivity was essential to reflect on my power and privilege as a white, housed, remote worker during this time period. The pandemic has made clear the inequalities across space, and how those inequalities are situated within structures of white supremacy and patriarchy (Eaves and Al-Hindi 2020). As previously discussed, there is a problem in the discourse of homelessness that renders those experiencing homelessness invisible. This is especially true for LGBTQ+ youth, who are undercounted yet overrepresented. Following insights from Black and queer geographies, it is essential for research to examine their complex, everyday geographies to provide insight to the problems and issues that they face. Further, such research allows participants to engage in acts of resistance, as they challenge labels such as “victim” and posit themselves as placemakers in the city (Eaves 2017). Such a project would better queer homelessness in Milwaukee; but in pandemic times, this care-full, queer research proved a difficult task. When Covid- related protocols were put in place at my university, I, like the graduate students of Loyd et al (forthcoming), took a “privileged pause” (12) to rework my methodological approach. Planned, in-person research activities, such as participant observation and interviews at a youth drop-in center, would put research participants and myself at risk for spreading Covid-19. To remove this

risk, I cancelled in-person research and shifted the focus to online methods, which are discussed in more detail below. This shift, the ability to shelter-in-place and continue to work on requirements for a master's degree, marks a privilege that others do not afford. The pandemic, with greater negative impacts on Black and Latino communities, caused many to face illness and loss, as well as threats of eviction, debt, and unemployment (Keiner et al. 2020).

### *Research Questions and Methods*

As previously discussed, in the field of geography there is a need to produce research that focusing on intersections of homelessness and sexuality as “more and more LGBTQ+ youth are experiencing housing insecurity” (Speer 2021a, 11). Further, there is a need to put forth research that places the voices of those experiencing homelessness at the forefront (Schmidt and Robaina 2017; Speer 2021b). However, as mentioned, the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted my ability to access young LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness in the city. Care-full research, focused on building ongoing relationships between myself and participants, could not be carried out during pandemic times. Accessing spaces such as the drop-in center posed a risk to the community I wished to center, as well as to myself. Instead, I shifted the focus to the voices of those who work with LGBTQ+ youth and youth experiencing homelessness. While these participants work closely with youth, provide care for youth, and often advocate for youth, they do not experience the city in the same way as youth. As such, the situated, partial nature of this research and my arguments are made clear. As a reminder, my research is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do service providers in the city understand LGBTQ+ youth homelessness?

2. Where do service providers identify barriers and gaps in the city for LGBTQ+ homeless youth?
3. In what ways do service providers challenge and/or reproduce LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in their care work?

To answer these questions, I interviewed service providers at organizations throughout the city that serve this population. These methods were selected to follow feminist urban geographers who chose to analyze the urban at the scale of households, bodies, and neighborhoods using qualitative, reflexive methods that include ongoing contact with research subjects and participants (Parker 2016). Organizations were selected if their work focused on LGBTQ+ youth or youth experiencing homelessness. I reached out to organizations through email addresses listed on the organization’s website or through the organization’s online information request forms. After that, I was put in contact with people that could participate. Table 1 lists participants and their organizations.

*Table 1: Service Provider Participants*

<b>Interview Participant</b>	<b>Relationship to organization</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Organization primary mission</b>
Grace	Shelter staff	A	Provide services that help young people have stability through positive youth development, trauma-informed care, and harm-reduction
Erin	Supported housing staff		
Debra	Youth programming staff	B	Serve LGBT youth, adults, and their allies in Milwaukee through educational, health promotion, and community building services.

Osha	Community services staff	C	Address on health disparities faced by the LGBTQ+ community in Wisconsin, especially people of color.
Eddie	Youth program staff		
Anthony	Youth program staff		
Brad	Cofounder, executive director	D	Raise awareness for LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, support displaced LGBTQ+ youth.
Jackie	Program director		

In Milwaukee, stay-at-home orders and other regulations were in place to prevent the spread of the virus. To follow these guidelines and protect myself and others, the interviews were conducted through video calls. Youth experiencing homelessness can be difficult to access, especially without being present in spaces such as a drop-in center or a shelter. The only access I had to youth was through service providers, who I asked to share my contact information with youth they thought might participate. Because of these conditions, I was unable to recruit youth for interviews. This silence must be acknowledged as a limitation in this work, but it also reflects a feminist care ethics and a desire to conduct care-full research. I could not practice care-full research while putting people at risk for Covid-19 and engaging with youth without building a relationship between participants and myself (Lawson 2007; Cahill 2007). Because of these circumstances, this research focuses on the perspective of service providers who work with youth and is therefore limited and partial in clear ways.

The data for this thesis comes from remote, open-ended qualitative interviews eight (n=8) service provider participants (Appendix A). Interview subjects represent four organizations in the city of Milwaukee that provide services for the LGBTQ+ community, LGBTQ+ youth, and/or youth experiencing homelessness. These interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom video



calls between November 2020 and February 2021. While it's difficult to "place" these remote interviews in the same way one might do with face-to-face ones (Elwood and Martin 2000), participants had the ability to participate in the interview in the space of their choice, removing travel time and other burdens (Gray et al. 2020; Howlett 2021). However, participants did not disclose their locations during the interviews, which could impact the information they shared during their interviews, such as the ability to critique their organizations (Elwood and Martin 2000). Each interview was about one hour in length and focused on the service provider organization and the city of Milwaukee's landscape of services for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness.

I based my thematic analysis and arguments on the data from these interviews. During the interviews, the transcription of the interviews, and reviewing the interviews, the data were coded for themes. I conducted qualitative coding to develop descriptive and analytic codes (Cope 2010), which informed the emerging themes from the data. I then developed these themes to create the arguments presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. The interviews and analysis are accompanied by ongoing reflexivity, with a purpose of ensuring the work remained careful of research participants and the youth who are the subject of the research.

In the next chapters, I discuss the themes that emerged from my interviews, focusing especially on structures that produce homelessness, the built environment, and caring for LGBTQ+ youth. I argue LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Milwaukee is produced through social and economic structures that prevent young people from accessing housing, employment, education, and health care services that affirms LGBTQ+ identity. I also argue that the built environment of Milwaukee, including accessible urban spaces and unreliable public transportation, reproduces the inequalities that shape outcomes of homelessness. Finally, I argue

that organizations that serve LGBTQ+ youth and youth experiencing homelessness center identity and fluidity in their care practices, but they exist within neoliberal structures that produce youth homelessness.

## Chapter 3

### More than Homelessness: Unequal Access to Services and Support

#### *Introduction*

While homelessness may be imagined as people sleeping on the street, in reality it is a complex experience produced in spaces across cities, impacted by the larger structures that create barriers to housing. This research aims to examine these conditions that produce LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Milwaukee using an intersectional feminist lens. Specifically, I consider how gender, sexuality, and race mark experiences of urban structures, creating outcomes of youth homelessness for vulnerable youth. Mitchell (2011) frames homelessness as a product of social conditions, shifting homelessness from an individual's responsibility to a phenomenon that is structurally produced. Further, feminist urban scholars argue that these urban social conditions are produced by and reproduce social oppressions (Parker 2011; Kern 2019; Klodawsky 2006). This research echoes the work of these geographers, as interviews with service providers often point to structural failings as a main reason for homelessness, rather than an individual's acts. Service providers in Milwaukee understand LGBTQ+ youth homelessness as produced by uneven access to housing, employment, education, and health services, which are all informed by and reproduce oppressions such as homophobia, transphobia, and racism.

In this chapter, I discuss the production of youth homelessness, specifically LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, as it is understood by service providers who work for LGBTQ+ and youth agencies. Participants describe how social vulnerabilities, including age, and oppressions such as homophobia, transphobia, and racism impact access to housing, employment, education, and

health services. Moreover, these vulnerabilities relate to the affirmation, safety, and opportunities that young people need.

As noted in the introduction, my analysis builds from interviews with eight service providers working in Milwaukee at four different organizations (A, B, C, and D). Organization A primarily serves youth, including youth experiencing homelessness. Their aim as an organization is to provide services that help young people have stability through positive youth development, trauma-informed care, and harm-reduction. This includes a youth shelter, drop-in center, and housing placement services. Organization B serves LGBT youth, adults, and their allies in Milwaukee through educational, health promotion, and community building services. Organization C is a public health organization that focuses on health disparities faced by the LGBTQ+ community in Wisconsin, especially people of color. They serve people of all ages through direct services, educational programs, and capacity building programs. Organization D is a nonprofit organization that works to raise awareness for LGBTQ+ youth homelessness. Their work includes a group home for displaced LGBTQ+ youth and scholarships.

The organizations are also actors in the constructing of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, as organizations are limited in the services they provide as well as the populations they serve. Irazábal and Huerta (2016) discuss the complexities LGBTQ+ youth navigate when accessing services, including lack of gender affirmation, the hours that service providers are open, and the ability of youth to “openly be queer without fear” (p. 719) in spaces. Between organizations in Milwaukee, there were differences in the ability to serve youths experiencing homelessness. For example, Organization A is the only organization to have specific programming and services for those experiencing homelessness, such as a drop-in center and youth shelter. Other organizations focus on different services and LGBTQ+ populations. For example, Organization C centers

health and advocacy for LGBTQ+ people of color in Milwaukee. Differences between organizations relate to differences in constructing youth homelessness in the city, as agencies have different capacities to address the needs of LGBTQ+ youth that experience homelessness. In other words, services that are provided as well as a lack of services contribute to landscape that informs youth homelessness. A more complete understanding of the role of service providers requires knowledge from youth, which is absent in this research.

LGBTQ+ young people are overrepresented in youth populations experiencing homelessness. Five interview participants discussed lack of support after coming out as a reason for homelessness or housing insecurity. According to Schroeder (2015), home spaces can be unfixed spaces of safety and insecurity for queer young people; in times of insecurity, youth may seek security elsewhere. But a lack of support exists outside of home environments as well. Interview participants describe a lack of support in other urban environments, such as a lack of safe public spaces, lack of affirmation in schools, or lack of healthcare that affirms and supports young LGBTQ+ people and their entire bodies and health. For example, in their interview, Eddie describes a lack of affirmation for transgender people in Milwaukee's homeless services:

“There's also the issue that a lot of homeless services in Milwaukee are just not inclusive to queer and trans folks. There are a lot of different services that serve a big majority of population living with critical homelessness, and those are not spaces that I will ever send a trans person to. And it's mostly because I know the staff is not affirming enough for this trans person to feel safe in.” – Eddie,  
Organization C

The challenge of affirmation that Eddie describes is an underlying issue beyond the realm of housing and shelter. Throughout their interviews, service providers describe affirmation as a central need for LGBTQ+ as they navigate systems of housing, employment, education, and

health, echoing the arguments of Irazábal and Huerta (2016). While these topics will be discussed separately, they are related; for example, access to employment is essential in maintaining housing. Anthony describes this scenario:

“It’s not even about like, the behaviors they chose to do, but who they are – already stacks it up and makes it difficult. And when you stack on top of that, oh, you’re not going to be able to find a decent place in Milwaukee for under 700 dollars a month,... “go and get a job... oh someone won’t give you a job because you’re trans, oh well sucks to be you then.” You know what I mean? It just becomes really frustrating then. So when people are in those situations, they come to us, and we want to search and find whatever resources we can, and help them, whether that’s employment assistance, or housing assistance. And like I said, when you’re over the age of 18 and you’re a childless adult, the resources just drop.” – Anthony, Organization C

Access to resources and limitations to these resources is a key theme discussed in interviews.

In this chapter, I focus on the structures that produce homelessness in Milwaukee. First, I discuss housing in the form of shelters and rental housing. I focus on how these spaces are informed by and reproduce oppressions for LGBTQ+ youth, and barriers to accessing sustainable shelter. Next, I discuss education and employment, and health services as important but limited resources for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. In both sections, I argue that youth homelessness in Milwaukee, specifically LGBTQ+ youth, is produced and reproduced by these structures of housing, education and employment, and health because these structures fail to support vulnerable LGBTQ+ youth.

## *Challenges of Housing for LGBTQ+ Youth*

### *Lack of Youth Shelters*

Shelters in Milwaukee provide temporary relief to turbulent housing or unsustainable housing practices, such as couch surfing. Service providers may direct young people to these shelters if they are in that situation. Debra, from Organization B, explains:

“If we have a youth that comes in and says, you know, ‘my mother just kicked me out’ or ‘I can’t be at home,’ one of the steps that we would do to help them make connections with places. Whether it’s a youth homeless shelter, or rather we can help provide food or clothes.... We’ll help call shelters.” – Debra, Organization B

In Milwaukee, there are 14 emergency shelters and two specifically for youth under the age of 18. Between these two youth shelters, there are a total of 16 beds; these shelters require young people under 17 to have permission from parents to stay there and are often at capacity. Beyond these limitations, there are other barriers that prevent young people from seeking out these shelters or other homeless services. To some, shelters and other aid are too regulated (Dooling 2009; Sparks 2017). There are certain requirements and rules that must be followed to stay in shelters, which leads some people to resist staying there. Behaviors could be regulated, autonomy may be restricted, and people could be separated from social connections (Dooling 2009; Mitchell and Heynen 2009). Youth may choose to resist the regulations of these spaces in search for autonomy.

To better understand the complexities of shelters, it is important to engage with a queer feminist approach that considers the role of gender and space within these environments. For example, shelters for people ages 18 and older are often divided by a gender binary of men’s and women’s shelters. This division has implications for trans people, who may be turned away from the shelter that aligns with their gender expression; on the other hand, people may use a survival

strategy of keeping their trans identity a secret in order to receive shelter. However, shelters, like other urban spaces, are constantly produced, and may become queer spaces by those who occupy them (Billies 2015); this points to the complexity of urban spaces and position of queer youth as placemakers. With this complexity in mind, Milwaukee's adult shelters were critiqued by one participant, Eddie from Organization C. He argues that heteronormative ideas of gender are reproduced through shelter requirements as well as by the staff. Eddie provides an example from a previous experience as a worker in a shelter:

“One woman who, she was cis and she was straight, but she was living very turbulent, so she didn't dress all that femininely.... And there were folks that would say stuff about her, someone said something about the hairs on her chin.” – Eddie, Organization C

In this instance, staff at shelters or other sites of service reproduce heteronormative expectations of gender expression. Eddie suggests such behaviors from staff and other people involved in homeless services creates a sense of unsafety within shelter spaces.

One youth shelter in Milwaukee is a part of Organization A, an organization of that was consistently praised throughout interviews. At this organization, LGBTQ youth and their needs are often centered in the organization's services. Grace, who works for Organization A, describes the importance of specified services in the youth shelter program:

“Having a shelter specifically for young people to go to often feels safer and more comfortable to young people, from what they've shared with us.... There are other programs within our agency which provide supportive services to the same young people that we are seeing at our shelter.” – Grace, Organization A

This shelter provides space and resources for young people who are dealing with crisis. Grace hopes that this shelter is a place of liberation for youth to express themselves and seek safety.



However, this is only one shelter in the city, and it only has 8 beds, creating a limitation in the availability of the service. Considering the lack of affirming shelters in the city to support the large number of homeless youths, homeless shelters are just one part of the geographies of youth homelessness in Milwaukee. Further, there is a need to consider this data as a partial experience of this shelter space. Schroeder's (2012) work critiques the relationship between adults and spaces for LGBTQ+ youth, suggesting that adults can create spaces that both empower but also constrain youth.

### *The Challenges of Renting*

A primary concern of those seeking housing in Milwaukee is the price of rent; five participants discussed the cost of housing as a barrier that young people face in the city. In tandem, young people usually lack a rental history and the ability to meet requirements to secure an apartment. Such requirements may include a security deposit, first month's rent, the last month's rent, or other fees and financial burdens. Valentine (2003) speaks to the connection between age and access to housing, arguing that age and its barriers to housing place youths in a transitional state that can lead to marginalization. Further, young people are vulnerable to unsustainable housing situations marked by power relations between landlords and tenants. Relating to the work of feminist geographers, age and class intersect with other marked differences, producing vulnerabilities as young people attempt to secure housing.

Barriers to housing relate to age and class as well as other social positions and identities such as race, gender and sexuality. Beyond the cost of rent, housing is deeply tied to systemic oppression such as racism (Bonds 2019) and homo- and transphobia (Matthews and Poyner 2019). For queer youth and youth of color, discrimination from landlords, neighbors, or others

can prevent securing stable housing. In their interviews, four participants discussed discrimination in housing, specifically discrimination along lines of transphobia or homophobia. In these interviews, it's mentioned that discrimination, while it happens, is legally difficult to prove; this is described by Debra:

“There’s... a lot of problems with discrimination and housing practices. We’ve had individuals who felt like they didn’t get housing or it wasn’t approved because the person assumed their identity or sexuality. Sometimes that can be hard to prove, but we’ve definitely had individuals that felt they couldn’t be up front with their identities because of discrimination in housing.” – Debra, Organization B

As Debra explains, young people experiencing this discrimination then have difficulty receiving legal protections from these practices. The uneven power dynamics between a landlord and tenant cross with other social dynamics, relating back to the overarching systems that produce youth homelessness. In their interview, Osha from Organization C describes connections between opportunities for housing and transphobia:

“Osha: As far as overall how housing looks like... landlords not giving the opportunity for folks to move in. And they can make up whatever reason they what to do that.... Instead people end up in these really shitty houses because that’s all they have an opportunity to.

Catherine (me): What are some examples of...reasons landlords would not let you move in?

Osha: Transphobia.” – Osha, Organization C

Osha’s interview speaks to power dynamics involved in securing housing in the city, suggesting private landlords may act on their transphobia and prevent a young person from being housed. From Osha perspective, transphobia results in people being forced into housing situations that

are not ideal. Considering Mitchell's framework of homelessness as a social condition, the power dynamics between a landlord and tenant that lead to discrimination and the financial requirements of obtaining housing are part of larger systemic issues.

LGBTQ+ youth who are also youth of color may face multiple and intersecting social vulnerabilities that ultimately contribute to the production and reproduction of homelessness. Housing discrimination in Milwaukee also comes in the form of racial discrimination, as Erin describes in her interview:

“Housing discrimination is a big problem. The root causes of that vary. Sometimes it's that our young people don't have enough rental history. Their credit scores may not be high enough.... Many of our youth are discriminated against due to their race, in particular communities that they to live in, on their application.” – Erin, Organization A.

Erin describes instances in which youth are not given a chance to obtain housing from landlords; as previously discussed, landlords have the liberty to turn away applicants for whatever reason. In addition to acting on transphobia or homophobia, landlords are empowered to act on racism to deny youth housing, reproducing vulnerability to homelessness. Racism and housing is well documented in geographic literature, especially in the case of Milwaukee (Bonds 2019) in which housing politics are embedded with structures to maintain white supremacy, such as residential racial segregation. Young people of color who are vulnerable to experiencing homelessness are impacted by multiple disadvantages along lines of race, class, as well as gender and LGBTQ+ identity.

While there are resources to help young people obtain housing, such as the services at Organization A, there are limitations to their work. Erin, a service provider at Organization A,

discusses these opportunities as well as the limitations of these services, particularly the financial support provided to young people. She states:

“A couple of our programs, the cap is seven hundred dollars, with another one it’s seven hundred twenty-four, per month, per participant. That has to cover rent and all the utilities.... We do the very best that we can, and I give my team so much credit that they really seek to negotiate with landlords to find safe places, that we’re not housing youth places where they don’t feel safe or comfortable.” – Erin, Organization A

Young people that qualify for the housing programs at this organization are given opportunities for housing. Qualifications for programs vary, and programs are usually created to serve specific groups, such as LGBTQ+ youth or victims of trafficking. In addition to housing assistance, the workers at Organization A can advocate for young people in negotiations with landlords.

However, the dollar amount of financial support, at or just above seven hundred dollars per month, limits the places where young people can stay. In Milwaukee’s racially and economically segregated neighborhoods, housing is not affordable in all parts of the city, especially for youth obtaining assistance from Organization A.

In summary, housing, both temporary housing in shelters as well as rental housing in the city, is important to young people experiencing homelessness. However, service providers identify certain obstacles that young people face when attempting to access shelter. From the service provider’s perspectives, there are barriers to accessing shelter and rental housing that relate to LGBTQ+ youth identity. In emergency shelters, there are a limited number of beds for young people under the age of eighteen. For those who are older, service providers perceive a lack of affirmation within shelters and homeless services, such as gendered regulations and expectations that are harmful to transgender and nonbinary young people. In the landscape of

rental housing, there are requirements to rent that are often difficult for young people to meet, such as income requirements, credit scores, rental history, or employment history. Further, landlords and housing are tied to systems of oppression, such as homophobia, transphobia, and racism that may hinder a young person's ability to find and maintain housing. Finally, there are limited resources that young people can use to secure housing, such as legal protections and housing assistance. In the next section, I focus on structures of employment, education, and health, that are also tied to the structures that impact housing for youth.

### ***Beyond Housing: Access to Employment, Education, and Health Services***

#### ***Employment and Education***

Employment and education are essential to obtaining secure housing, as housing is tied to wages and earnings. However, the median income in Milwaukee does not provide enough to cover the high cost of rent in the city (Martinez et al 2018). Those in low-wage positions will have limited options for housing. Moreover, like housing, employment and education are marked by experiences of systemic social oppressions. Young people experiencing discrimination in housing may also experience discrimination within school environments and while attempting to obtain and maintain jobs, especially jobs that provide a livable wage. As Debra describes in her interview:

“Having access to funds... to get into housing. It can be difficult...with the amount that the jobs are paying. It's hard to be able afford a basic apartment for yourself sometimes... especially when they're already receiving discrimination with trying to obtain employment.” – Debra, Organization B

Debra explains how discrimination in finding employment contributes to the inability to secure housing, but that maintaining a job does not guarantee the ability to afford housing in

Milwaukee. Low-paying wages do not provide workers with enough money to cover the cost of rent, especially if one wanted to live by themselves without roommates. Geographic literature, such as the work by Klowdasky et al (2006) documents neoliberal structures that provide care to youth in the form of job training, placing the problem as the responsibility of youth. Similarly, Hashimoto's (2020) work addressing the racialization of social policies in Milwaukee that impact the labor market and reproduce racial hierarchies in the city. As such, being young, being a person of color, or being transgender could all cause a young person to face discrimination in employment. Eddie, while discussing a young person he was mentoring, describes how age, in particular, can be a barrier to finding housing and employment:

"Knowing that it would be really difficult for him to find a place...just by being nineteen with no real work history... I was able to help him get a gig where he was able to get enough money to afford a place, but, you know, no one was finna look at a nineteen-year-old with three thousands dollars and be like 'yeah let's give you an apartment with no background and nothing else attached to you.'" – Eddie, Organization C

Eddie's comment echoes the previous discussion of housing; young people are often not given opportunities, for various reasons, including discrimination along lines of age, race, or LGBTQ+ identity. In addition, two participants discussed the locations and far distances young people must travel every day to get to work. This is called the spatial mismatch theory, in which there is a spatial disconnect between labor markets and jobs (Gobillon et al. 2007). Osha describes this problem in Milwaukee:

"I hear from a lot of folks that they really end up getting jobs that are hours away. Okay, now I have to make this huge piece of transportation, and recognizing how inconsistent public transportation is, I might be late for my job on multiple

occasions, and I can only do that so many times before I get fired, and that's not completely in your control." – Osha, Organization C

In Milwaukee, there is an issue of inconsistent public transportation and transportation infrastructure that is difficult to navigate without a personal vehicle. Those that are dependent of public transport, especially for work, have been negatively impacted by the changes to Milwaukee's transportation system (Rast 2015). This problem becomes another barrier for young people that are trying to maintain housing and employment. Research participants suggest that like landlords, employers may act on transphobia, homophobia, or racism when hiring and firing employees. Service providers connect this to risk of being involved in unsafe sex work, where young people are in situations where they are exploited in exchange for resources such as shelter.

Young people experiencing homelessness in Milwaukee are also navigating education environments that impact their sense of affirmation, as well as their ability to gain skills needed to secure housing and employment in the future. Six interview participants discussed the Milwaukee Public School System (MPS); four participants specifically said that young people's needs are not met by their Milwaukee schools. In Eddie's interview, he says it is essential to ask, "how do MPS and private schools actively fail young people in... providing them services." (Interview with Eddie, Organization C).

In their interviews, service providers discussed two of the ways in which MPS was not meeting the needs of youth in general and LGBTQ+ youth specifically. The first is underfunded schools that leave students behind their peers in other school systems. Jackie describes how this gap relates to differences in urban Milwaukee and its suburbs:

"I see education funding being just a huge [gap]...the education gap between what kids are given as a school in Milwaukee and given as a school in some of the suburbs. That's huge." – Jackie, Organization D

Moreover, this gap is within MPS as well. Debra describes this:

“Schools in the MPS district, they don’t have enough funds to properly educate the students, which I think leaves some of them behind, especially in certain schools. They just don’t have money to have proper necessities that the kids need.” – Debra, Organization B

These quotes suggest that MPS fails already vulnerable children because it is underfunded and unable to provide necessities as well as education. In addition, service providers discuss ways in which MPS is failing LGBTQ+ students. One way discussed in an interview was affirmation in educational environments. Anthony describes this:

“So there’s a number of places in which MPS is not consistent either in having safe spaces or spaces where LGBTQ young people can feel like they belong.... Like I said, there are a number of schools that do it well, but there are equally as many or more than that don’t do it well or at all.... I think GSA can kind of be that for some folks, again that depends on the GSA and where they’re at.” – Anthony, Organization C

These spaces, such as GSAs, are assumed to be spaces of LGBTQ+ belonging in schools (Baine and Podmore 2020). Having these spaces in school where students can seek community, especially those who are not supported at home, is beneficial. Anthony argues the presence of supportive school spaces, such as active GSAs, is an issue within MPS, showing uneven LGBTQ geographies between schools.

Employment and education, like housing, is connected to the systemic failures such as homophobia, transphobia, and racism that hurts LGBTQ+ youth. Service providers discuss how these oppressions are related and prohibit young people from accessing jobs or educational opportunities. The perceived failures of systems such as the MPS to serve all young people



impacts the most vulnerable, such as those experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness. In addition, these places can be spaces where affirmation for LGBTQ+ identities and people is not present, causing further harm to LGBTQ+ youth. In the next section, I discuss the context of health service for LGBTQ+ youths, and how these services are also embedded in the structures that produce youth homelessness.

### *Health Services*

In each interview, the service providers emphasized the importance of having access to health services, specifically services that are affirming for LGBTQ+ people. This was frequently discussed as a gap of services in the city. As described by Osha at Organization C, an LGBTQ+ Health Organization that focuses on the needs of BIPOC communities in Milwaukee:

“Our healthcare system... being able to serve queer and trans folks, where they’re recognizing their full bodies and what that looks like, full bodies and who they love, who they have relationships with.” – Osha, Organization C

Lack of affirmation in health services can make LGBTQ+ youth resistant to getting the care they need, including exclusion along race and gender within LGBTQ+ organizations (Rosenberg 2017). Race and care is theorized in geographic literature by Raghuram (2019), who draws connections between modern care interactions and colonial logics based on racial hierarchy. In other words, care, including health care, is marked by racism. Raghuram also argues for an intersectional lens when examining care. Following this call, it is important to then consider LGBTQ+ youth and their many identities and embodiments. Osha’s quote speaks to the importance of this, especially within her position at an LGBTQ+ public health organization for

people of color. Moreover, they describe how LGBTQ+ may be put in a box, such as only being served for HIV and not for other types of care:

“One of the biggest things that we hear about is that people are just being overlooked or having assumptions made on them.... People going in for something and just being directed to HIV things, you know? And its like, okay, but that’s not... I’m more than that.” – Osha, Organization C

Those at Organizations A, B, and C, all discussed services that they provide to try and address this gap, such as trainings for medical professionals, changes to intake forms, and providing care where there is none. Organization D, a group home for LGBTQ+ youth, helps young people access healthcare and other services. These participants identify the insecurities and stress that youth experience when they are not affirmed in health services.

Participants identify the availability of services, especially mental health services, is lacking for LGBTQ+ young people in Milwaukee. Debra describes this gap and its relation to other factors such as race and socioeconomic position:

“Mental health services [is a gap], especially with Black and Brown people. That’s something that’s being worked on in the city, but I think there’s still a gap. Because there are a lot of people who are unable to afford... it’s not a luxury, but it’s, you know, something extra that people have to put on the backburner.” – Debra, Organization B

Debra describes how the need for mental health services is related to the intersecting experiences of LGBTQ+ identity, race, and socioeconomic status. She describes mental health as “something extra,” something that is not easily financially accessible. For young LGBTQ+ people, especially people of color, stressors from housing insecurity on top of experiences of oppression can be detrimental to health.

Interview participants identify the connections between employment, education, and health services as key elements in Milwaukee's landscape and the production of youth homelessness. They connect the ability to obtain and maintain access to housing to employment and education, and how this is impacted by overarching social oppressions that may prevent youth from accessing these opportunities. Further, participants discuss the role of health, especially mental health, as another factor that impacts the livelihoods of LGBTQ+ youth. They identify connections between identities and health, connecting experiences of youth within these spaces to larger social structures of racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I argue that systems of housing, employment and education, and health are conditions that produce youth homelessness in Milwaukee. Based on the interviews with participants, there is a lack of affirmation and support within these systems for LGBTQ+ youth, particularly youth of color. Further, participants suggest a lack of services negatively impacts youth and creates further vulnerabilities to experiences of homelessness.

In terms of housing, young people experience difficulties in access temporary shelter space as well as more permanent spaces, such as rentals. Service providers suggest that shelter spaces are especially problematic for transgender or gender non-conforming youth, as gender binaries are produced in shelter spaces. Further, access to renting apartment is impacted by boundaries such as costs and discrimination by landlords. These boundaries are marked by intersecting experiences and oppressions such as age, class, race, and gender. In addition to housing, youth are situated in intersecting experiences and oppressions in systems of employment, education, and health. Service providers indicate that discrimination from

employers, lack of supportive education, and affirming health resources are all conditions that produce LGBTQ+ youth homelessness.

## Chapter 4

### Where to Go and How to Get There: Urban Spaces and Mobility

#### *Introduction*

Milwaukee's urban spaces inform the complex geographies of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. According to the eight people interviewed from four organizations, young people navigate complex and contested spaces of safety and vulnerability as they move through the city. The challenges of housing, employment, access to services, and other aspects of youth life discussed in Chapter 3 are reinforced by the uneven geographies of urban investment, policing, and access to urban spaces. Service providers relay their understandings of the spatial aspects of youth homelessness, availability of spaces for LGBTQ+ youth to exist as their true selves, difficulties in utilizing public transportation, and the neighborhoods where youth may be welcome or unwelcome.

In addition to examining urban spaces, it is also important to consider access to these spaces and movement between spaces. Previous literature addresses mobility in urban environments, considering transgender youth and youth of color (Irazábal and Huerta 2016; Cahill et al 2019) and experiences navigating urban spaces (May 2015b; Lubitow et al 2017; 2020; Goh 2018). This chapter contributes to this literature by documenting the barriers of the built environment, including lack of urban spaces for LGBTQ+ youth, and an unreliable public transportation that impedes youth mobility. Further, I document the imaginings and materials of specific places in Milwaukee that service providers identify, and how these places relate to the broader production of youth homelessness in the city. I argue that Milwaukee's urban

environment, including the built environment, are important aspects of the production of youth homelessness, and reproduction of the systemic oppressions.

In what follows, I first examine Milwaukee's urban spaces as both material and social. The first section, "(Lacking) Urban Spaces," consists of a discussion of the presence, or lack, of urban spaces in Milwaukee that young LGBTQ+ people can freely occupy. Based on the interviews with service providers, I discuss how urban spaces are regulated to prevent LGBTQ+ affirmation and safety. This is particularly pressing for trans youth and youth of color who are often criminalized in urban spaces. Next, in the section "Urban Mobility: Transportation in the City" I discuss the importance of mobility in the place-making of youth, as well as the importance of navigating the city and its services. I discuss how the mobility of youth is impacted by Milwaukee's primary public transportation, Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS). Finally, in "Knowing Where You're Welcome: Places of Milwaukee," I discuss the significance of specific places that were discussed in interviews, and how the imaginings and materials of these spaces draw attention to the uneven urban landscape, reinforcing the inequalities that lead to the youth homelessness.

### ***(Lacking) Urban Public Spaces***

In critical geographic literature, scholars explain the important connections between the social and built aspects of cities. Built urban spaces reflect social structures, and social spaces are impacted by the built environment. While there are urban spaces that are marked as LGBTQ+ spaces, such as gay enclaves or "gayborhoods" (Brown 2014), these spaces are complex, contested spaces of inclusion and exclusion (Doan 2007; Brown 2014; Rosenberg 2020). Social structures impact how spaces are used and who can use them. In other words, structures such as

transphobia and racism, as well as capitalism are active in the creation and regulation of urban spaces, even spaces marked as LGBTQ+. For example, Doan (2007) argues that queer urban spaces have highly gendered dimensions that are not friendly to transgender people. Similarly, Rosenberg (2020) argues that LGBTQ+ urban enclaves are spaces of exclusion to trans youth and youths of color, who resist the urban ordering that promotes whiteness and capital. Further, literature documents the commodification of sexual spaces, specifically white, gay spaces (Bell and Binnie 2004), which render spaces as grounds for consumerism, neoliberalism, and homonormativity (Brown 2013; Binnie and Skeggs 2004). In Milwaukee, the neoliberal logics that guide development create spaces of exclusivity through the commodification and privatization of space, with negative implications for those already vulnerable based on class, race, ethnicity, and gender (Ward 2007; Hashimoto 2020). LGBTQ+ youths, especially those who are trans, people of color, and vulnerable to homelessness, are susceptible to the policing and exclusion of urban space in the city.

In their interviews, the service providers indicate that intersecting identities and social placements play a huge role in the experiences of youth in Milwaukee, especially along lines of gender and race. Anthony describes the need for youth to “just be” in the city:

“I think sometimes there is a lack of community resources, I don’t know if that’s the best way to say it, but a place for young people to just be able to be at. And be like ‘oh this is our space, this where we’re at.’.... Thinking about the other youth serving organizations in town, .... the YMCA, The Boys and Girls Club, COA, Running Rebels, and they all do good work, [but] those services are for heterosexual cisgender young people.” – Anthony, Organization C

Anthony makes a point to describe the importance of urban spaces that are affirming to LGBTQ+ youth. He indicates that there are youth organizations, but these may be presented

through a heterosexual, cisgender lens; to Anthony, these spaces, both physical and metaphorical, are not queer. To understand how these organizations exist as heterosexual, cisgender spaces, it is important to consider that spaces are produced, and are more than physical. Giesecking (2013) points to queer theory that approaches spaces as material and imagined, as well as social, constantly being produced in everyday ways. Moreover, Schroeder's (2012) work points to the role of adults in the construction of space for LGBTQ+ youth. Spaces and places have different meaning for different people, and Anthony creates meaning for those places based on his experiences and suggests queer youth would experience a lack of affirmation in these spaces.

Anthony's argument, that young LGBTQ+ people often lack spaces, relates to urban phenomenon such as the privatization and policing of Milwaukee's public spaces. Hashimoto (2020) discusses the changes to Milwaukee's urban landscape, specifically developments in the downtown area aimed to attract a creative class to revitalize the city. While development attracting the creative class commodifies LGBTQ+ space (Florida 2012), it reproduces the exclusions within those spaces. Eddie discusses the issue of public space in Milwaukee:

“Our parks, bridges, creeks, lakes, rivers... public creeks and things like that are all, ... a lot of our parks and public spaces are being sold off.... So, if all our public parks and spaces are sold off, and a lot of these places are places where homeless encampments are there, or sometimes young people crash there at night..., or even just cruise to, you know, do some work... Now these are private parks, and they can't access them anymore, you know?” – Eddie, Organization C

Eddie is describing the privatization of public space, a major outcome from the neoliberalization of cities. Spaces that were once free and open to the public have undergone a transformation that makes them less accessible, such as a financial barrier or policing of the spaces. In Milwaukee,



this process is guided by the public-private partnerships with an aim to increase capital at the expense of the city's vulnerable populations (Ward 2007). Moreover, Eddie is describing the impact that the process of privatization has for youth. Youth lose spaces that may be used for rest or work; when these spaces are privatized, youth may not freely occupy the spaces.

Access to spaces is also marked by feelings of safety in urban space. In her interview, Jackie from Organization D describes the importance of young people having access to spaces and places in the city:

“I want them to know a bunch of... places in the city that they can go, so we try to do as many community outings as possible. ...are we thinking about what places... might be safer, and what might not be safer? Are we thinking about, you know, where we want to use the bathroom and where we don't?” - Jackie, Organization D

Jackie emphasizes that safety is a component of urban space. To describe what “safety” means, she says:

“You get a feeling, like this doesn't feel safe if people are giving me weird looks. And the stress, and the chronicity of stress that people carry when you don't know... is this strange look or strange feeling going to stay there, or is it going to get bigger? And as we've seen this rise of hate crimes in the last four years, you know, not knowing which is it going to be.” – Jackie, Organization D

Jackie is describing embodied experiences of urban space, and how these experiences are tied to safety within and access to spaces in Milwaukee. She draws attention to restrooms, further connecting the body to space. Her point about safety connects to Anthony's discussion of places for LGBTQ+ youth to “just be” in the city; young people have a need to feel safe and comfortable within urban spaces.

Another factor in the accessibility of public spaces is policing and criminalization within these spaces. Critical geographic literature addresses the criminalization of youth in public spaces, including spaces that are supposed to be spaces of care and support for youth (Brown 2014. Rosenberg (2017) examines how service providers in Chicago’s “gayborhood” uphold whiteness within those spaces by policing LGBTQ+ youth of color. Goh (2018) documents the policing and resistance of LGBTQ+ youth of color in New York, calling attention to the work of activist to reimagine safety in a way that is supportive of these young people. Access to safe, urban spaces is further impacted by intersections of gender and race as urban spaces are transformed. LGBTQ+ youth of color navigate cities in ways that is impacted by both LGBTQ+ and racial identities. Irazábal and Huerta (2016) use an intersectional lens to document LGBTQ+ youths’ of color navigation, resistance, and placemaking in urban space, critiquing the whiteness of planning. Moreover, as public spaces have become more and more privatized through processes of development such as gentrification, spaces are also unevenly policed. Cahill et al (2019) documents young Black and Brown people’s experiences with policing in gentrifying cities. LGBTQ+ youth, particularly trans youth and youth of color, are frequently criminalized in urban spaces (Rosenberg 2020). In their interview, Eddie, discusses how young people in Milwaukee experiencing policing in urban spaces:

“I feel like our city focuses too much on criminalization for young people. Especially if we talk more about queer and trans young people... Oftentimes instead of being given services, they’re more often criminalized, especially in terms of their interactions with law enforcement, social workers, sometimes even their teachers and instructors; everyone around them is basically a police. And not an actually community member for them.” – Eddie, Organization C

Importantly, Eddie notes that policing comes from not only law enforcement, but from other authority figures such as social workers or teachers, showing that policing can happen in different ways in different spaces. Ramirez (2020) discusses the spatialization of the criminalization and displacement of youth of color; she discusses the role of schools in the reproduction of youth as criminals. These “police” may perceive young people and their behaviors to be criminal, especially if they are not white or cisgendered. These assumptions, interactions with “police” resulting punishments can be detrimental to them. As discussed by Grace, youth who do make mistakes may be judged harshly, and because of their race, gender, or economic status, may endure harsh consequences:

“A lot of our youth don’t get... permission to mess up. It’s almost like if they mess up once, they’re doomed, and they have like a red mark on them that stops them from being able to move forward. Which is so unfair because I think in so many households, young people mess up and maybe because of having enough money or privilege or just different support, they’re able to do that and still be able to be successful and move forward.” – Grace, Organization A

Grace connects privilege, such as racial or gender privilege, to the ability to “mess up” and recover or move forward. If a young person makes a mistake, as both Eddie and Grace suggest, they are often punished in a way that has lasting harm rather than being provided services or support.

In this section, I have discussed urban spaces in general, and how these spaces are related to social structures in the city. I discussed the perception of urban spaces by the service providers as spaces that are accessible and welcoming to LGBTQ+ youth. This is discussed in different ways, such as the existence of spaces, safety within space, and the policing of spaces. Next, I turn to movement between spaces in a discussion of urban mobility.

### ***Urban Mobility: Transportation in the City***

In addition to accessing urban spaces, LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness move between urban spaces; in other words, their experiences are tied to urban mobility (Jackson 2012). This was commonly discussed in terms of transportation, specifically public transportation. The literature tells us that public transportation is an area of significant interest when examining queer urban spaces. For example, Lubitow et al. (2017) examine the *transmobilities*, or mobility of transgender and gender-nonconforming people using public transportation. This research points to experiences of transmobilities that are informed by a system that normalizes violence towards transgender and gender-nonconforming people. Moreover, Gieseeking's work explores movement as an essential element of queer urban geographies, especially for lesbians, transgender folks, and people of color. Traditional understandings of territory and spaces, such as spaces that are fixed and publicly marked, do not capture the entirety of queer urban spaces (Gieseeking 2016). In other words, queer folks create queer spaces that are unfixated, unmarked, and impermanent. Considering a lack of marked, public spaces for queer youth, it is important to consider how youth create their own spaces in the ways described by Gieseeking. Further research with queer youth, especially with attention to racialized differences, is needed to create a richer understanding of the connection between mobility and LGBTQ+ youth geographies and geographies of homelessness in Milwaukee.

Public transportation in Milwaukee was identified as a barrier for LGBTQ+ youth in the city that are experiencing homelessness. The issue of public transportation is tied to the discussions in Chapter 3, especially in terms of moving between housing, employment, and other services. Reliable public transportation is essential to those who do not have personal vehicles in the city. Anthony describes this issue:

“Transportation is always an issue for the people that we work. You know, getting to places can be difficult because there aren’t many bus routes, so you’re often times waiting for a long time. If you miss your transfer, you have to wait an addition amount of time, so getting to places is really difficult. The continuing slashing of the budget of public transportation has consistently made it more and more difficult for the people we serve to get to the things they need to get to. Whether it’s coming to see us, or getting to a doctor’s appointment, or even if it’s having more options for where they’re going to get their food” – Anthony, Organization C

Like Anthony, other service providers identified the bus service in Milwaukee through Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) as something that may be inconsistent, unsafe, or unavailable. Hashimoto (2020) mentions the neoliberal logics of funding entrepreneurial urban development in the place of public services, such as transportation, as in issue in Milwaukee. As previously discussed, this type of development impacts the city’s already vulnerable in negative ways.

In addition to accessing the bus, mobility includes the embodiment of movement. Each person experiences the moves through the city in different ways. Eddie and Osha describe some of the embodied experiences of being an MCTS bus rider:

“This is not the most reliable system, especially in the cold like the winter. For Wisconsin to be a place known for its winters, the fact that we don’t have public bus stops that are automatically heated... it’s a weird situation to me.” – Eddie, Organization C

“Thinking about folks that don’t feel safe in certain areas, and standing outside, and also if they have to take really long trips. One of the biggest things [is] bathrooms, and ‘what does that look like for me?’ Or just being through different

communities that go outside of my own where I'm not longer safe... that's definitely a struggle here." – Osha, Organization C

In these quotes, being outside is related to be experiencing weather, such as the freezing weather of Milwaukee's winters, as well as experience feelings of a lack of safety. The inconsistency or infrequency of the bus system can further impact these feelings of discomfort and unsafety. Osha describes using the bus as going through communities that are "outside of [their] own;" this could be the bus itself and its riders, the locations of stops or transfer stops, or their destination. Literature documents potential experiences of violence, particularly gendered violence (Lubitow et al 2017; 2020).

A major concern of those relying on public transportation, specially MCTS, is the inability to consistently get to the places youth need to go, such as employment. Unreliability presents itself in the few routes and stops, and long travel and wait times for rides and transfers, an outcome of decreased funding for public transportation. This relates to broader urban processes of decentralization of cities, the growth of suburbs and rise of employment opportunities in the suburbs, and infrastructure that prioritizes personal vehicle use (Jackson 1984a). Grace describes the inaccessibility of Milwaukee's suburbs to those who do not have their own form of transportation:

"Some of the suburbs and stuff just right outside Milwaukee in some ways aren't that far away but yet, for someone who doesn't have transportation is incredibly far." – Grace, Organization A

The distance and time taken to access suburbs is important, because suburban areas are often the location of jobs for young people. Osha describes this situation:

“If you can’t find employment in the area, again, going back to homophobia, transphobia, antiblackness, all of that, so you have to just try to get whatever job you can, and I hear from a lot of folks that they really end up getting jobs that are hours away. Okay, now I have to make this huge piece of transportation, and recognizing how inconsistent public transportation is, I might be late for my job on multiple occasions, and I can only do that so many times before I get fired, and that’s not completely in your control.” – Osha, Organization C

In this quote, Osha connects public transportation to employment as well as homophobia, transphobia, and antiblackness. She suggests that because of these systemic oppressions, those that LGBTQ+ youth, especially trans youth and youth of color, must find work where they can, rather than where they want. Public transportation might not support them; because of its inconsistency, youth may be frequently late to work, and because of their gender or race, might not be given permission to “mess up” in this way. The outcome would be a loss of a job, a loss of income, and exacerbating an experience of housing insecurity. Through these connections, the role of the built environment, such as transportation infrastructure, is a condition reproducing urban inequalities and reproducing LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in the city.

In this section, I discussed mobility as it relates to material conditions, such as transportation infrastructure. Considering the built environment, in this case, roadways and how they are used, addresses another dimension of the urban conditions that inform youth homelessness. The built, material elements of the cities are informed by and reproduce inequalities by failing to support the needs of those who are vulnerable, including LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. Next, I turn to an examination of specific places in Milwaukee, and how these places are situated within Milwaukee’s urban environment and landscape of homelessness.

### *Knowing Where You're Welcome: Places of Milwaukee*

In addition to general public spaces, there are specific locations in Milwaukee that service providers identified in their discussions of youth homelessness. These areas, such as particular neighborhoods or suburbs of the city, may be places that are welcoming, places of disinvestment, or places of contestation. As participant Erin describes, “they know where they’re welcome and where they’re not. They get that feeling” (Interview with Erin, Organization A). Service providers discuss places such as the lakefront of Lake Michigan, The North Side, or The East Side, all informed by physical and social conditions that impact young people’s ability to access, exist within, and move through these locations. Racism plays a large role in the uneven geographies of Milwaukee, negatively impacting LGBTQ+ youth of color as they navigate the city.

Social and material conditions are produced by and produce structures of racism in the city. Milwaukee’s residential segregation is often considered the worst among American cities (Levine 2020). Racist practices such as redlining and racial housing covenants inform the racial geographies of the city today (Loyd and Bonds, 2018; Bonds 2019). While it is always impossible to separate race from place, Milwaukee’s geographies exemplify the material outcomes of systemic racism in its built environment. Historically, white neighborhoods and suburbs are places of investment while nonwhite, especially Black neighborhoods do not receive the same government support (Jackson 1985b; Fullilove 2005). Further, Hashimoto (2020) documentation of contemporary Milwaukee indicate development continues to benefit white residents while reproducing racial hierarchy. There are implications of this for those that occupy these spaces. For example, Osha describes walking around Milwaukee as it relates to uneven



geographies of the city's places, particularly the contrast between the East Side and the North Side of the city.

“Another thing that's a really big struggle is walking. Just walking around places. And how clearly on the East Side, that's obviously an option, and there's obviously nature and rivers and lakes and things. But on the North Side, that's not always the case, and when we're specifically talking about Black folks, that's a huge barrier.” - Osha, Organization C

The East Side is described as a place that's walkable, with physical features that impact the experiences of the spaces. The North Side, which Osha connects to experiences of Black folks, does not have these same features. The experience of walking through the North Side is different than the East Side. Debra, from Organization B, also identifies the North Side as having an uneven geography of investment:

“If you are on the North Side of Milwaukee, the streets are horrible. That's a lack of funding that effects the community. Those potholes it can distress someone's car and they can't afford to get that fixed, so it's like a domino effect, you know, with all those things. I don't think enough money is being pouring into the North Side of Milwaukee.” – Debra, Organization B

Debra connects the North Side, especially its infrastructure and lack of funding to maintain it, as impacting the everyday experiences of those that live there or travel through that place. A car, or other personal vehicle, is so beneficial to navigate the city, as public transportation is often lacking. And yet, Debra describes the impact that the potholes of the North Side's roads on one's vehicle, adding another financial burden to individuals who may already be struggling.

Equal access to amenities across the city is tied to racial as well as economic barriers; therefore, the places that do have these amenities have higher rents nearby, keeping those with

lower economic status away. Erin, from Organization A, describes parks and greenspaces in the city as necessities that people do not have equal access to:

“From a rental perspective, parks and greenspaces [are a barrier that youth face]. It’s so necessary for...from a public health standpoint, that’s such an important part of life for us. Unfortunately a lot of what we’ve seen, being close to the lakefront, being close to some of the bigger, beautiful parks, those rents are higher” – Erin, Organization A

Erin indicates that parks and greenspaces are linked with higher rents; young people that are struggling to afford housing will not be able to live in places that are near the lakefront and East Side, with its large parks and greenspaces. Further, those spaces will be heavily policed, creating a strong barrier for LGBTQ+ trans youth and youth of color.

Beyond the East Side, Milwaukee’s suburban spaces, which are heavily racially white, are spaces that may be unwelcome to LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, especially youth of color. Brad, from Organization D, a group home for LGBTQ+ youth, describes logics that impacted his decision for the location of the home:

“If I wanted to open this house, I don’t know, ... somewhere like Greenfield, and I have a house full of Black kids, I think that we would be a target. Totally be a target. We don’t have a sign up here with a big rainbow on it because we didn’t want to make a bullseye, right?” – Brad, Organization D

Brad discusses the connection between place, race, LGBTQ+ identity, and violence. Greenfield is a majority white suburb of Milwaukee. Brad indicates that not only would the Black youth be unwelcomed in the area, but they would be “a target,” suggesting they would be over policed, criminalized, or experience worse violence. Moreover, Brad discusses the house as being located

in a place where they do not feel safe outwardly expressing LGBTQ+ identities. In this case, invisibility and anonymity serve as way to protect LGBTQ+ youth.

In this section, I draw attention to the perceptions of specific places in the city of Milwaukee and its suburbs, and how these places exemplify the broader discussion of urban space, mobility, and the conditions of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness. These places, with social and material differences, show how uneven geographies across the city can impact experiences of youths. In addition, attention to the role of racism in the construction and maintenance of the built environment and its features provides insight to barriers faced by LGBTQ+ youth of color.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter, I discuss urban spaces, their material and social aspects, that service providers believe play an important role in the production of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Milwaukee. Further, I argue that LGBTQ+ youth mobility, particularly as it relates to embodied and material experiences of transportation, is identified as an important feature and barrier of LGBTQ+ youth urban experience, particularly to access spaces of care, work, and home. I also consider the perception of specific places to Milwaukee as they relate to the production of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in the city.

Service providers discuss as lack of public space as a barrier to LGBTQ+ youth in the city. They argue that spaces are not affirming of LGBTQ+ identities and are policed in ways that oppresses LGBTQ+ youth, especially youth of color. Further, service providers discuss the importance of the public transportation system of Milwaukee in accessing the spaces and places. The disinvestment of the public transportation and unreliability of services has a negative impact

of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness in the city. Finally, specific places in the city are identified to exemplify the uneven landscape of Milwaukee.

## Chapter 5

### **Identity, Fluidity, and Neoliberal Constraints: Caring for LGBTQ+ Homeless**

#### **Youth**

##### *Introduction*

Providing care to LGBTQ+ youth, especially those that are experiencing homelessness, is a pressing need in Milwaukee. Participants identify disparities in rates of homelessness, as well as other health outcomes for LGBTQ+ compared to youth who do not identify as LGBTQ+. Participants were asked about policies and the landscape of Milwaukee, and how their work is impacted by and fits into this landscape. The service providers implicitly discuss how their organizations exist within neoliberal structures that impact how they provide care to youth experiencing homelessness. Within these structures, they provide care with attention to two primary components: identity and space and fluidity in care.

In this chapter, I discuss neoliberalization and non-profit homeless services and how this impacts care for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. I begin with a discussion of the neoliberalization of care, particularly homeless services, in Milwaukee. I draw from interviews to contextualize how neoliberal urban landscapes impact the provision of care in the city. I then discuss how organizations provide LGBTQ+ within this context, specifically pointing to the importance of identity and fluidity in care. I also critique these organizations, and point to the silence of youth voice in this research to provide a more complete understanding of the impacts of neoliberalization and the care landscape of Milwaukee for LGBTQ+ youth.

### *Neoliberalization and Non-profit Homeless Services*

Neoliberalization is an important component of the conditions of youth homelessness, as neoliberal logics influence urban politics and spatializations. Neoliberalism is a philosophy that emphasizes free markets and rejects government intervention in the economy. Policies created and implemented in this logic result in the roll-back of the welfare state in the United States, shifting the responsibility of social services from the government to smaller-scale private actors. Geographers examine the role of neoliberalism in urban environments, including spaces of care. The work of Klodawsky et al. (2006) engages with feminist theories of care as related to youth experiencing homelessness in neoliberal times, examining how youth are situated in multiple scales of policy decision and implementations. They argue that care is often absent in government agendas, causing local organizations to address the needs of youth. Mitchell and Heynen (2009) describe these organizations as part of the *geographies of survival* for people experiencing homelessness, providing short-term support. Organizations are therefore embedded within the politics of neoliberalization and are actors in producing conditions of homelessness (DeVerteuil et al 2009). This is evident in Hennigan's (2016) critique of the Housing First model solution to homelessness as a "lever of market discipline" (p. 1418). Housing First is a model often used to address homelessness in which a person is granted housing first, followed by other opportunities for treatment and services. Hennigan argues that within this model, organizations are still participating in the capitalist market, and they are still upholding existing structures of housing. Moreover, there are specific critiques of LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations; Andrucki and Elder (2007) consider how LGBTQ nonprofit organizations are formed under constraints of the state, arguing the state is an actor in the creation of LGBTQ+ space and must be analyzed as such; state regulations and logics shape nonprofit LGBTQ+ spaces. The complexity of nonprofit

organizations as situated within neoliberal urban space is particularly evident as neoliberal structures impact the organizations and the service provider's care work. Klodawsky (2009) argues that neoliberal, market-driven policies make it difficult to enact measures to end homelessness, such as the creation of affordable housing units. Instead, Mitchell and Heynen (2009) see adaptations of geographies of survival shaped by increased surveillance, privatization, and criminalization of urban dwellers and spaces.

The participants in this research are workers for nonprofit organizations in Milwaukee. These organizations aim to address the failures of the state, such as inadequate healthcare and housing. Jackie describes this in relation to government budgets:

“The biggest thing is just a general lack of funding and a lack of importance placed on kids who are not, just not deemed important.... When laws, when the budget is passed, and the budget has very little funding for social services.... We're seeing that we don't put a value on mental health, and we don't put a value on teenagers' mental health. That we are just consistently not giving kids options. And so, I see just the general budget, in this county and this city, and this state, in the country, just being a huge factor of resources available for kids.” – Jackie, Organization D

Jackie discusses how the budget reflects social and economic values, and how resources for youth are not prioritized, echoing the claims by Klodawsky et al (2006). The state produces youth homelessness, as the budget and other policies impact the conditions of urban environments and the conditions of youth homelessness. The work of nonprofit organizations, therefore, is in a complex situation of addressing the gaps in services from the state, while competing with other organizations for the resources to do so.

One component of the service providers' work is to address the system inequalities experienced by young LGBTQ+ people. Some organizations focus on specific populations of

LGBTQ+ folks, such as people of color (Organization C) and youth that are a part of the welfare system (Organization D). Overall, the conditions of neoliberalism create a need for the organizations to provide care; Grace, from Organization A, describes how her work fits into Milwaukee's overall landscape, especially as it relates to youth homelessness in the city:

“Last year or the year before, DPI reported that there was roughly 5,000 youth experiencing homeless. That was within the Milwaukee Public School System alone. Just MPS. So, that's only one school system out of many that exists within Milwaukee and the surrounding areas. And so, with that number being as high as it is, that's where our program fits in. We are a shelter, so we serve youth who are in crisis, who are experiencing homelessness.” – Grace, Organization A

Grace identifies a huge need for her work in Milwaukee. Young people experiencing homelessness are experiencing the outcomes of state policies and structures, such as a lack of affordable housing, lack of mental health care, or lack of financial support.

In addition to creating a need, neoliberal conditions also impact how care can be provided, particularly through stipulations attached to grants and resources. Participants frequently identified this in terms of access to and distribution of resources. Fund raising and the limitations placed on funds greatly dictates who can receive resources and what these resources are. This is documented by Merritt (2001) who indicates that the ability of nonprofits to serve those in need is dependent on public interest and support through funding and volunteered labor. Debra discusses the issue of funds and resources in the following quote:

“We want to have more participants. Because that's what we want to do to get the word out, and that we're reaching people. That's how we'll grow into something bigger and get more funding to provide. You know, when you're nonprofit and you need grants and donations, sometimes you can be limited with what you can do or how far we can prove that we can grow a program and receive funding for



it. I just want to see more participants. I want the things we provide to be relevant to what's needed" – Debra, Organization B

Debra describes the tension between accessing funds and being able to provide resources to those in the community that need it. In her organization, Debra relies on clients to show up; if they do not, then there is a risk that the services will no longer receive funding and will be eliminated. In addition, Debra states that they cannot always see their programs to their full potential, as funding and resources may be limited. Anthony also describes this tension, as he discusses Organization C:

“While we recognize there are other places that LGBTQ folks could need some support, ... if they're places that don't have high health disparities, we're not really focusing on that area. Part of that is ... trying to gather the resources to address an issue in the community can be difficult. So, for us ... if we can only gather resources to address a few issues, then let's address the issues that are affecting our community the most.” – Anthony, Organization C

Anthony, like the other participants, recognizes that their organization cannot address every issue that impacts LGBTQ+ people, or LGBTQ+ youth. For example, while all organizations are serving LGBTQ+ youth, only one has specific programming and services for homelessness.

In addition to accessing funding, there are also structures that impact how funding and resources can be used once nonprofits have access. Limitations on services by funders, such as limits to how much can be spent per person, who qualifies for funding, or what funds can be used for all impact the service providers and how they provide care. Erin, the service provider that works with connecting young people to housing, describes this issue:

“[From] a lot of our funders, we have a funding cap for how much we can pay for apartments. So a lot of them say, ‘okay, we'll approve you at 725 dollars or 700

dollars a month, utilities included.’ So, what does that mean? That means our young people are boxed in to low-income communities, right?... But it is really hard when those structures, and our funders, who don’t intend to do that with the parameters that they’re setting, but truly they are, ... we are boxing youth in. That is determining really where they can afford to live, which determines what neighborhoods they can be in.... We’re trying to do as much advocacy as we can to push our funding partners on that. And for the most part I think they hear us, and hopefully soon we’ll see some change about that” – Erin, Organization A

In the case of this organization, it is possible to see the direct connections between nonprofit funding structures, the power of funders, and the reproduction of urban inequalities. Erin describes young people as being “boxed in” to the low-income neighborhoods, which as discussed in Chapter 4, is related to lack of access to mobility other support. These limitations are therefore reproducing conditions of economic instability and vulnerability to homelessness.

Urban neoliberalization has implications for those experiencing youth homelessness as well as those aiming to address it in their work. Interviews with service providers reveal how the limitations of neoliberal structures, such as policies that shift care to work of private actors, place service providers in complex situations of providing care and services to youth, while also participating in the system that keeps youth vulnerable. In the next section, I discuss how LGBTQ+ organizations aim to provide care in these conditions, with particular attention to the importance of identity and fluidity in care spaces.

### ***Identity and Space***

Participants identified the importance of having spaces and care that is specific to LGBTQ youth. As discussed in Chapter 4, affirmation in space is important to the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. In other words, LGBTQ+ youth need spaces where they are open to be

themselves without fear. All but one organization represented in this research primarily focuses on serving Milwaukee's LGBTQ+ population. The service providers that work for these organizations recognize the importance of being LGBTQ+ organizations. For example, Brad describes the importance of being an LGBTQ+ group home:

“We will not take a child in our home if they don't identify as LGBT. Because that's the whole mission of this house, right?... I want them to come here and feel comfortable, and not have to have that guard up, and not have to have that secret. Because how are they going to get better if they keep having to have a blinder or a shield up?” – Brad, Organization D

Within these spaces, participants also argue that it is important to have staff that identify as LGBTQ+. The staff offers representation to young people, including showing the many ways one can identify and express LGBTQ+ identities. Osha shows this in her discussion of representation below:

“I think it's really important to have a space that's solely for LGBTQ folks, and especially for young people where they get to look up and see that, ‘I can stay alive,’ you know? There's other adults that are living their lives, that are happy, not constantly living in fear.” – Osha, Organization C

When discussing having an LGBTQ+ space, the participants are connecting these spaces to emotions and feelings such as comfort, happiness, and security. This contrasts discussions from Chapters 3 and 4 of spaces, such as shelters, health clinics, or public spaces, where there is a lack of affirmation or causes for fear or insecurity. Four participants also discussed that they want youth to be able to establish roots and create a community so that they can be continually supported. Further, some organizations include specific groups and services for those of diverse LGBTQ+ identities, recognizing different LGBTQ+ experiences, such as groups for queer Black

men, Trans Black women, LGBTQ+ folks with disabilities, and groups for youth. While geographic literature points to a need to critique these spaces, considering the dynamics of age (Schroder 2015) as well as broader state power that informs nonprofit spaces (Andrucki and Elder 2007), it also important to consider that service providers themselves are often situated within complex personal geographies and have power to create queer or LGBTQ+ affirming spaces within their organizations. Essential to this conversation is youth voice: although absent in this research, participants identified its importance in the work they do.

Within the organizations, participants suggest there are opportunities to practice affirmation in these spaces by emphasizing youth voice in the organization. Youth voice is active in different ways and to different degrees among organizations. For example, in Organization D, youth voice is present in daily conversations between staff and the youth at the group home. In Organization A, youth have a strong voice in the decision-making processes of the agency, as well as in the care they receive from the agency. Erin describes what youth voice looks like:

“[Organization A] believes very firmly that positive youth development ... needs to be at the foundation of what we do. ... It is really making sure young people are a part of decision-making processes and that ... they have some responsibility and accountability when it comes to moving things forward from an agency perspective.... They have been a huge part in making decisions about what services we offer.... They are involved right now in most of our hiring that we do [for] anyone that is going to be hired as a direct service provider or someone who would be interacting with our youth. We get a youth panel together to be involved in those interviews so that they’re able to give feedback. Whenever we make larger or more sweeping decisions on behalf of the agency, regarding safety or internal operations or things like that, typically what we’ve done is ... have a town-hall setting meeting at the drop-in center. All of our youth across the agency are invited, and we look for feedback. We look for thoughts from our young

people to make sure decisions are not made without them. But that they feel involved in some way.” – Erin, Organization A

Erin’s comments illustrate an effort to involve youth in major decisions involving the agency and its care. This approach echoes the call from Klodawsky et al (2006) for youth care places where “multiple needs might be addressed in a somewhat open-ended and multi-faceted manner” (p. 432). Erin hopes that her agency’s practices are effective in making sure youths are active in the agency and have a voice in agency spaces. Moreover, from the same organization, Grace discusses how this process is related to the larger structures of neoliberalism and its impact on care:

“Years ago, [there were] some pretty drastic budget cuts in one of our programs, so we knew there had to be cuts somewhere, so we took it to the youth to say, ‘hey, if you could lose any of these things, which one would you be okay with losing?’ and so they gave us feedback on that which directed the way that we did things.” – Grace, Organization A

Grace’s discussion of the youth voice in cutting programs relates to the overarching neoliberalization of care. In this instance, both youth and service providers participated in the restructuring of the landscape of care. Situations such as the temporary nature of grant money, the slashing of budgets, or the lack of fund-raising can all impact the ability of youth to access services, altering Milwaukee’s landscape and reproducing inequalities.

Finally, these organizations exist within a landscape that is marked by other services and organizations. This creates possibilities for those within organizations to create affirming spaces beyond their own and to increase the reach of their work. For example, two of the organizations provide trainings for other organizations, as well as establishments such as schools or medical facilities, to provide information on how to be inclusive to LGBTQ+ people. The aim of this

work to create more affirming spaces of care for LGBTQ+ people, including youths. However, it is important for organizations to increase the reach of the work so that they can continue to exist within the landscape of care. As previously discussed, nonprofits are constantly trying to obtain resources and funds, and proving their worth to the public (Merrett 2001). For one service provider, he hopes that this system can be challenged; Eddie mentions that they want youth and others to feel empowered to criticize their and other organizations in order to make services better. He says:

“The work that needs to be done needs to be taken out of the arms of institutions and back into the hands of the community, and community needs to be the one to lead the changes in our services. And that comes with encouraging community to be critical of the institutions around them and the people that serve them and be comfortable with calling out those institutions. ... I want more community members to be comfortable calling out [Organization C], because it’s needed. Not to say that [Organization C] needs to be called out for anything, but if it does, I want it to happen.” – Eddie, Organization C

While other participants are describing a need to expand the spaces of security, affirmation, and care for LGBTQ+ youth, Eddie explicitly calls out institutions that reproduce the need for LGBTQ+ youths and LGBTQ+ organizations to fight for urban space. As Klodawsky (2009) posits, existing policies and practices, specifically market-driven, neoliberal structures of care, are not adequate in addressing the needs of those experiencing homelessness. Further, Eddie calls for the need for youth to be empowered and challenge the neoliberal nonprofit organizations that participate in the maintenance of social hierarchies and oppressions.

Service provider participants express the importance of the connection between LGBTQ+ identities and spaces. Service providers attempt to address gaps in Milwaukee’s landscape by providing spaces that are affirmative for LGBTQ+ and space for youth voice within their

organizations. This is complicated by the overarching neoliberal logics that inform non-profit organizations. While services providers may have good intentions, they are often unable to address root causes of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in their work and participate in the reproduction of the inequalities that produce LGBTQ+ youth homelessness. In Milwaukee, these processes are impacted by the stark racism that is evident in the city. Race and racism are components of the service providers' work for LGBTQ+ youth in Milwaukee.

### *Race and Care*

As discussed in previous chapters, LGBTQ+ experiences of youth homelessness are connected to experiences of racism in Milwaukee. Race and racism are embedded in the care, impacted how care is given and receive, who provides care, and who is cared for (Rangharam 2019). The subject of racism and segregation in Milwaukee was a topic discussed in every interview. However, there were differences in what race and racism means to the work that is done within organizations. Most organizations discussed addressing racism in their organization through means such as educating staff, diversifying staff, or reaching out to people of color to utilize the organization's services. For example, Debra from Organization B says:

“We do want to bring more people of color into the center.... Me, myself and other coworkers, we've raised our outreach to people of color, like over 50%. So that's a big jump. So, we want to see about getting them into the building also.” –  
Debra, Organization B

Debra indicates that a primary way of providing services to people of color is through outreach, showing how this organization is attempting to extend its clientele through unfixed spaces. In this case, unfixed means providing care outside of the primary location of the organization's

building to access people of color. This reflects a fluidity in care provided by the organization that is needed to better serve people of color in the city.

Between organizations, there are different constructions of race and care. This is particularly evident in differences between Organization D, a nonprofit organization that runs a group home for LGBTQ+ youth, and Organization C, a LGBTQ+ Public Health Organization for People of Color.

I will first consider Organization D, which has a white lens as far as providing care to youth. This white lens stems from the whiteness of the organization's board and members of staff. Both participants from this organization, Brad and Jackie, discuss the need to address the whiteness of their staff, with a solution of hiring more people of color. Jackie discusses the issue:

“I think that we are really trying to have our staff look even more like our residents. So have Black and people of color on staff, and who can relate to the kids in a bunch of other different ways. So that's a really big issue.” – Jackie, Organization D

In addition, Brad discusses how these conversations came to be, and that the attention to having more staff of color, or making other changes based on racial differences, are dependent on honoring youth voice in the agency. In reference to providing care based on gender or race, Brad says, “the only thing we do is give them the house rules; the rest of it is them telling us” (interview with Brad, Organization D). In the following quote, Brad points to the role of getting youth feedback:

“But especially with last year, when all the marches were happening, we were having lots of conversations with our kids, about, you know, how can we make this feel more like home for you? Being that our staff is so white, what more can we do? Something as simple as making sure we're discussing hair product with them.” – Brad, Organization D



Brad's quote brings attention to multiple issues relating to race and care within the agency. The 2020 Black Lives Matter Marches, activism that is primarily youth-led, sparked conversations and drew attention to the issue of race in the organization. Another point is that Brad mentions the everyday situations, such as access to appropriate hair products, that are important to the affirmation of youth in the care they receive. It should be noted that both Brad and Jackie are in positions of high-power within the organization, and the voice of workers within the house and youth who live there could provide a more complex understanding of the organization.

The "white lens" of Organization D is not uncommon in LGBTQ+ organizations in Milwaukee, and the participants from Organization C, which focuses on serving LGBTQ+ people of color, discusses why countering the white lens and the focus on racial justice is essential. To describe his work, Eddie from Organization C says the following:

"As an agency, at [Organization C] we primarily focus on Black identified and Brown identified LGBTQIA folks in the community. We do heavily focus on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. So, we do heavily focus on concepts such as institutional racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, transphobia, homophobia and the different intersections of how these oppressions affect us as a community. But individually, I consider my work, and the core of what I try to do in my career decolonization work." – Eddie, Organization C

Eddie describes their work as "decolonization work" in which they challenge the construction of LGBTQ+ and queer identities as it relates to upholding white supremacy and patriarchy, and the ways in which oppressions impact Black and Brown LGBTQ+ people in Milwaukee. This is done through the creation of spaces for people to do decolonization work, such as the queer and trans men's group that they led at Organization C. Eddie describes why spaces specifically for queer people of color is important:

“We get to get to the deeper level of queer and trans experiences outside of ... the surface level places like the [Organization B] gets to tackle. Oftentimes queer and trans issues are often viewed from a very white lens. ...Being in a space where we get to talk about being queer and being trans and also talk about the intersections of the experience of our race, is oftentimes really fun and insightful.” – Eddie, Organization C

Eddie explains that they have the ability to deconstruct “LGBTQ+” as an all-encompassing identity and recognize the diverse experience of those that identify as LGBTQ+ or queer, as well as intersecting identities and experiences of race in Milwaukee. He indicates that there is a difference in the work and care that is provided at Organization C than at Organization B. However, as previously mentioned, Debra from Organization B is trying to challenge the whiteness of the organization. Moreover, Osha asserts that in serving people of color in Milwaukee, they are still able to serve others as well. They describe this in the following quote:

“Our main priority is for serving Black folks in the community. And then also recognizing Indigenous, Latinx folks, people of color across the board. And in doing that, and prioritizing folks that are BIPOC is just recognizing that no matter what, we’ll still reach everybody. But those are folks in the community that have consistently not had their needs met. And that’s also a majority of our staff.... We’re all hired to be able to be in the community and work directly with the community and recognize what that actually means and looks like.” – Osha, Organization C

Osha’s argument echoes back to the previous discussion of affirmation in spaces; they argue that LGBTQ+ people of color need to be affirmed and receive care that acknowledges not only their sexualities and gender identities but also their racial and ethnic identities. Affirming intersecting

identities addresses and challenges the ways that LGBTQ+ and people of color have been oppressed in systemic ways.

As far as youth homelessness, the overrepresentation of LGBTQ+ youth and youth of color that are experiencing homelessness suggests that attention to system oppression should be considered in their care. But, as indicated in geographic literature, the neoliberalization of care makes it difficult for more sustainable changes to be made. I turn now to another way these organizations provide care within these structures, through fluidity in care practices.

### *Fluidity in Practices*

Research indicates that queer youth and their spaces of security and insecurity are unfixed (Schroeder 2015). In other words, a safe space could be constructed and deconstructed at different times and locations. This fluidity is also present in some service providers' care to LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. This was exemplified in different ways through the idea of meeting youth "where they're at." Grace describes the way this fluidity and flexibility is present in her organization:

"I think they turn to our services because the people in all of our programs are very nurturing, and we're very trauma-informed, and we focus on youth engagement, and we do so by meeting basic needs first. And after those basic needs are met, then we move forward. And we do all of these things, where the youth are at. It's all voluntary: it's what they're needing, it's what they're wanting and when they're wanting it, and when they're ready for things." – Grace, Organization A

In this case, Grace indicates there is flexibility in the care and services that are offered to youth; this fluidity is based on the youth's voice in their care. Echoes the arguments of Klodawsky et al

(2006) for flexible care spaces for youth experiencing homelessness, Grace suggests that LGBTQ+ youth benefit from care services that are implemented on their terms. Grace describes her organization's services as voluntary and provided at a pace that is determined by the youth. Other service providers also pointed to the need to listen to the community and provide the services they say they need. For example, Debra from Organization B discussed an upcoming community needs assessment, and Osha from Organization C discussed their recently collected trans needs assessment. If services are provided based on these assessments, then the assessments are tools to practice fluidity in care.

In addition to fluid practices of care within the organizations' locations, spaces of care are created in different locations throughout the city through outreach services. Erin at Organization A discusses the importance of her organization's street outreach work:

“[The street outreach team] amend their schedule and their locations and their stops based on what youth in the city are saying they're needing. Typically, they're more central city locations; locations where we're seeing higher rates of poverty, higher rates of violence, high rates of trafficking and drug usage. And they're just trying to provide as much support as they possibly can.... On a regular basis, staff are providing meals, bagged lunches typically, hygiene products. In the winter months, hats, scarves, mittens, things like that. Safer sex materials. Sometimes they do have bus tickets or things that they can hand out for young people who say 'I really need to get to the drop in center' or 'I really need to get to my case manager but I don't have a way.'” – Erin, Organization A.

Erin shows how this work is fluid; the schedule and locations of the street outreach is changing pending the needs of the youth it serves. Further, the care that is provided is also subject to the changing needs of youth. As previously discussed, Debra at Organization B also uses outreach as

means to provide care, specifically for people of color, whose mobility and access to LGBTQ+ care spaces may be limited.

There are limitations to the flexibility and fluidity of care based on nonprofits situation within broader neoliberal urban landscapes. One example is the restrictions imposed in funding. As previously discussed, access to funding and resources and how these resources can be used impact the care that can be provided. Erin discusses how this issue impacts the housing support that can be provided to youth:

“From a housing perspective, we advocate for every opportunity we get, for unrestricted, more flexible funding opportunities, where we can really be trusted to do whatever we can to support our youth.” – Erin, Organization A

Erin identifies a need for flexible funding: funding that is not limited by parameters set by funders, but rather funding that can be used in different ways to meet the needs of youth. Greater flexibility could benefit youth experiencing homelessness (Klodawksy et al 2006), and service providers such as Erin are working to resist restrictions in their work.

While these organizations create spaces for LGBTQ+ that can be complex, contested spaces of care or exclusion, there are efforts on behalf of service providers to provide unfixed care through fluid practices. This is exemplified in the efforts to incorporate a variety of services based on youth needs, to listen to youth, to conduct outreach services throughout the city, and push back against limitations in funding. The service providers suggest this is especially important for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness who need flexible, affirmative care.

## *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I argue that the neoliberalization of the urban care landscape in Milwaukee shapes the work of service providers and their organizations. Within this context, service providers provide care to LGBTQ+ youth in ways complex ways. I focus on instances in which services providers provide care to LGBTQ+ youth with attention to identity and fluidity to create care spaces that are affirmative. However, I also discuss how these spaces are complicated by nonprofits' roles in reproducing the conditions of oppression and youth homelessness.

Service providers emphasize the importance of funding in their ability to provide care to youth. Funding and resource limitations often prevent service providers in providing care that is flexible to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ youth. Despite this, service providers believe it is essential that LGBTQ+ have care spaces that affirm their identities, although this is complicated through different productions of intersectional experiences, such as race and LGBTQ+ care. Moreover, service providers attempt to engage in fluid, unfixed care practices that are attentive to the needs and locations of youth.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion: Questions (Un)answered, Work that Remains

“I would say, talking about what’s going on within the past year, whatever changes are going to be happening, Covid is going to be impacting my work. Especially in terms of, how do I access young people? Cause like you said before, because of Covid, it’s really difficult to access young people.

And now imagine how the young people feel because of Covid. A lot of young folks’ school, and other third spaces like after school programs, clubs, community spaces, or like, space for them to actually meet other people, probably network, get resources that they needed. And now these spaces are all shut down. [Organization C] used to be a third space for young people, and now we’re shut down. And we just don’t have a lot of access to young people. And that just makes things all the more turbulent for them, you know? If they can’t go to school, and they can’t go to their third space, then where the...where the hell they gonna go?

I feel like that’s what’s affecting my work right now and that’s what’s going to affect it later on in the future, because Covid’s going to change a lot of how we run and operate as people in society.” – Eddie, Organization C

I include these words from Eddie to highlight the significance of the Covid-19 pandemic, which greatly impacted the world during the time of this research project. Eddie, whose insights guided key components of this research, situates himself, youth, and his work in pandemic times. They draw attention to the spatial implications of the pandemic and its shutdowns for young people, particularly the loss of access to third spaces such as schools, clubs, or other gathering spaces. They also discuss losing the ability within their organization to reach young people,

something that also impacted me as a researcher. They assume the shutdowns and loss of third spaces, which were few to begin with, make the lives of youth more turbulent. He asks bluntly, “If they can’t go to school, and they can’t go to their third space, then where the...where the hell they gonna go?” This question could not be answered in this research project.

The aim of this research is to analyze Milwaukee through a geographic lens that centers LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. I commenced the project with the goal of examining the (re)production of youth homelessness in order shed light on how youth navigate the highly unequal urban landscape of Milwaukee. I examined how service providers understand youth homelessness and how intersectional identities and difference impact their work. I also examined how the city, including its built environment, reproduces the inequalities that shape experiences of homelessness in Milwaukee. I collected data from semi-structured interviews with eight service providers at four different organizations in Milwaukee. My research and analysis underscore the argument in this research: LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Milwaukee is informed by urban conditions that are reproduced through the built environment and neoliberal logics of care. This argument is based in on key findings, discussed in detail below.

The first key finding is that LGBTQ+ homelessness is produced through the interconnected structures of housing, employment, education, and health care services. There is a lack of support for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness throughout these structures, which then reproduce inequalities. Previous research indicates that LGBTQ+ youth need safe and affirming services in cities (Irazábal and Huerta 2016). However, in Milwaukee, racial and income segregation create uneven access to housing and services, a pressing issue in the city (Loyd and Bonds 2018). Further, existing services may not support LGBTQ+ youth or youth of color (Rosenberg 2017). For example, shelters in Milwaukee were described as unable to meet



the needs of those who use them. According to participants Anthony and Eddie, youth shelters do not have enough beds in the city to support the number of youth in need of shelter, and adult shelters are not affirming to LGBTQ+ or queer identifying people. Participants generally discussed a lack of services for LGBTQ+ youth in the city, suggesting that support for youth is not valued as a social need and is instead a responsibility of the individual. This speaks to scholarship such as Klodawsky (2006; 2009) and Klodawsky et al. (2006) which addresses the neoliberalization of homeless services that often lack a critical lens. In other words, services do not usually take into account facets of identity and difference in meaningful, useful ways. Such services would benefit LGBTQ+ youth.

Participants identified a lack of opportunities for youth to obtain sustainable housing, employment, and supportive education and health care. Housing costs, employment locations, poor funding for schools, and LGBTQ+ affirming health care stand out as barriers that young people face. Further, these opportunities are tied to systemic oppressions such as homophobia, transphobia, and racism, reproducing vulnerabilities for LGBTQ+ youth, especially those who are trans and people of color. For example, Osha, Debra, and Erin all identified discrimination, especially for transgender folks, as being a major barrier to accessing housing. As participant Erin suggests, young people face issues when trying to obtain housing from private landlords, due to lack of funds and rental history. Beyond housing, young people may have difficulty finding well-paying jobs in accessible locations, and they may lack education and health care options that meets their needs and supports their identities. This echoes previous work on Milwaukee, which criticizes the logics that inform Milwaukee's development strategy, showing that benefits are unevenly distributed across people and places (Hashimoto 2020).

The next key finding is that Milwaukee's built environment reproduces uneven social conditions that contribute to the production of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness. Research participants discussed the uneven material and social condition of urban spaces in the city, calling out a lack of queer spaces and welcoming spaces for LGBTQ+ youth in the city. In the quote that opened this chapter, Eddie describes this issue as especially pressing in pandemic times, as shutdowns and stay-at-home orders limit access to LGBTQ+ spaces. As argued in Chapter 4 by participant Anthony, many of the spaces and resources available to young people are presented through a heteronormative lens. Further, participants and previous research brings attention to the way urban spaces are policed, and the negative impacts this has on trans youth and youth of color (Rosenburg 2017; Cahill 2019).

Participants also discussed the role of Milwaukee's public transportation system as a barrier to youth, especially in the lack of reliable services for youth to access home, work, and other services in the city. The Milwaukee County Transit System, which serves the city of Milwaukee and its inner suburbs, was frequently criticized as being unreliable for young people. The cuts to Milwaukee's bus service reflects the impacts of the city and county's values and logics that reproduce uneven geographies (Hashimoto 2020) and impact youth mobility.

Participants also identified specific places and locations in Milwaukee as evidence of the uneven social and material conditions of the city, especially the ways racism impacts these spaces. Loyd and Bonds (2018) analyze Milwaukee through a racial lens that draws attention to these uneven environments. The implications are huge for youth experiencing homelessness who are frequently Black (Milwaukee COC; Morton et al 2018). As the racial justice movement had a moment in the summer of 2020, service providers reflected on the segregation of the city, calling out places such as the East Side, the North Side, and suburbs such as Greenfield. They identify

material and social differences relating to race and racism in these places, and they discuss implications for youth who occupy these places. For example, Erin describes how youth “know where they’re welcome and where they’re not,” speaking to the different attitudes associated with these spaces.

The final key finding is that neoliberal structures impact service providers in the way they provide care to LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness. Service providers address the ways that neoliberalization of care, especially funding for care, creates limitations in the ways they can serve LGBTQ+ youths. For example, Debra describes the need to have people in the building of her organization, so that they can be counted and used as leverage to gain funding. There are critiques of LGBTQ+ nonprofit spaces (Andruki and Elder 2007), the role of adults in LGBTQ+ youth spaces (Schroeder 2012; Rosenberg 2017), and neoliberal logics of homeless care (Klodawsky 2009; Hennagin 2016). Care providers are limited by funders and regulations that shape who can be cared for and how. Further, care is provided in a way that works in tangent with the state, reproducing the conditions that create homelessness, and seeking neoliberal “solutions,” such as job training, to “fix” homelessness.

Despite these structures, service providers often have the intention of helping youth. Within these organizations, care is provided in a way that centers and affirms LGBTQ+ identities and fluidity in practices. Many participants described the need to “meet people where they’re at,” to describe the relational and individualized care practices that LGBTQ+ youth need. This echoes the arguments of Klodawsky et al (2006) which argues for care that is open-ended and aims to address the multiple needs that youth have. Considering the intersectionality of this care, there are different approaches to other facets of identity, such as constructions of race. While some participants identified a need in their organizations to hire more diverse staff, others went

further and described their work as decolonizing work, addressing more structural issues than hiring practices. Overall, participants discuss the importance of centering youth voice in their work to guide care practices and exercising flexibility in their care.

This research seeks to address calls from scholars in the field of geography to consider the complex geographies of youth (De Montigny and Podmore 2014), critically examine care (Raghuram 2019), and bring attention to LGBTQ+ homeless youth (Spear 2021). I contribute to the growing discussion of LGBTQ+ youth and LGBTQ+ youth homelessness within urban environments. Specifically, I address how the structural condition of Milwaukee produce and reproduce urban homelessness. I also consider the built environment as active in the process, and I situate LGBTQ+ youth and youth homelessness nonprofits within these structures. The research participants discuss a lack of services and opportunities for youth, which is manifested in different ways across urban space. For example, discrimination in housing and employment, lack of queer spaces and services, and reproduction of neoliberal care in nonprofit services. Young people in Milwaukee navigate complex and unfixed spaces in the city, and their experiences are marked by structural oppressions and exclusions.

This work is limited in different ways. Some organizations in the city that serve homeless and LGBTQ+ youth populations were not represented by participants. In addition, this research focuses on formal spaces of care, rather than informal spaces and networks that are queer spaces of affirmation and care. Importantly, this research is limited in that the absence of youth participants creates a major silence in this work. The perspective of youths is essential to create a richer knowledge of Milwaukee's queer geographies and conditions of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness. Moreover, the perspective of youth is necessary to complicate the position of nonprofit organizations, identify contradictions in these urban care spaces, and provide insight to

the embodied experiences of urban spaces and homeless experiences (Raghuram 2019; Speer 2021). Further, the absence of youth voice reproduces the problematic representation of youth as vulnerable and victims of urban space, rather than space makers who engage in practices of resistance (Eaves 2017). In terms of this research project, the silences and invisibility of the voices of those experiencing homelessness (Speer 2021a) are problematically reproduced.

As Eddie says in the opening quote of this chapter, “Covid’s going to change a lot of how we run and operate as people in society.” Geographers are already considering the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to push for change in research and beyond. For example, Springer (2020) suggests that this moment in time is an opportunity to reassess the political economic structures that benefit the few at the expense of many, arguing that mutual aid and collectivity is essential to human survival. Eaves and Al-Hindi (2020) suggest the implementation of intersectionality in studying the pandemic, and to consider the needs of the most vulnerable. Loyd et al. (2021/forthcoming) suggest the pandemic brings attention to the need to challenge the neoliberal structures that shape the academy and research.

A primary goal for future research is to address the limitation of this project by engaging with research that is youth-oriented, including youth in all aspects of the research, including data production and analysis. This practice is identified as a way to make work richer, as well as more socially just (Cahill 2007). This research also guides future research questions relating to LGBTQ+ youth homelessness in Milwaukee. For example, each key finding presents an area for more in-depth research of urban conditions, spaces, and networks. Considering housing and homelessness, future research should call into question current housing practices and homeless services, and address how these may be queered to better serve youth experiencing homelessness. For example, Irazábal and Huerta (2016) call for expansive affordable housing

programs coupled with other services, such as counselling, that specifically serves LGBTQ youth of color. However, if future research could consider how LGBTQ+ youth create queer spaces of housing and home, then these housing programs could better serve queer youth. Neoliberal and heteronormative assumptions of housing as it currently exists could be resisted, and housing could be reimagined to create opportunities that are more intersectional, queer, and caring home spaces. Future research and policies should reflect the voices of youth and aim for a more caring Milwaukee.

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## Appendix A

### Service Provider Participants

<b>Interview Participant</b>	<b>Relationship to organization</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Organization primary mission</b>
Grace	Shelter staff	A	Provide services that help young people have stability through positive youth development, trauma-informed care, and harm-reduction
Erin	Supported housing staff		
Debra	Youth programming staff	B	Serve LGBT youth, adults, and their allies in Milwaukee through educational, health promotion, and community building services.
Osha	Community services staff	C	Address on health disparities faced by the LGBTQ+ community in Wisconsin, especially people of color.
Eddie	Youth program staff		
Anthony	Youth program staff		
Brad	Cofounder, executive director	D	Raise awareness for LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, support displaced LGBTQ+ youth.
Jackie	Program director		

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

#### Questions for service providers

1. What does your agency do, and what is your role?
2. How does your work fit into the city of Milwaukee's landscape?
3. How does your agency take into account inequalities of gender, race, age, sexualities, etc.?
4. What are the long-term goals of your agency relating to young people?
5. Are there any recent government policies that have impacted your work?
6. Are there changes to the physical landscape of the city that has impacted your work?
7. Thinking about Milwaukee's built environment, what are some barriers or challenges faced by your clients?
8. How do your clients access your services? Do they drive, take the bus, get a ride?
9. How could your agency improve service to its clients?
10. What are some gaps in services in the city?