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Social Oppression & Transformation

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Adapt A Module: LGBTQ Teen Homelessness

**Compelling Question**: “What pushes LGBTQ teens your age to leave home at rates higher than average?”

**Target Grade**: High School

**Text Set**:(all citations are located under the “references” section)

“[Coming Out to the Streets](https://www.academia.edu/44254999/Coming_Out_to_the_Streets_LGBTQ_Youth_Experiencing_Homelessness)” - Brandon Andrew Robinson, 2020 (article)

The text begins with the story of Zoe, a transgender girl from the Texas area who becomes homeless in the seventh grade and uses drugs as a coping mechanism. After providing the background story, the text further examines what societal standards added to the pressures that forced Zoe out of her family and home and how inequality exists even within the LGBTQ community. Robinson then further delves into their research about the separation between gender and sexuality and how many teens must undergo the process of understanding their own identity while dealing with a heteronormative society that can constantly oppress them and their way of life. Furthermore, Robinson also discusses intersectionality of racism on top of heterosexist norms that further oppress those who are homeless in the U.S. Overall, this text serves as a great starting point for students to understand the experience of LGBTQ youth in America and the societal pressures that can drive many people to leave their homes and live on the streets.

“[The Cost of Coming Out: LGBT Youth Homelessness](https://lesley.edu/article/the-cost-of-coming-out-lgbt-youth-homelessness)” - Lesley University, (website/statistics)

This site from Lesley University provides statistical information about LGBT youth homelessness as well as the programs that do and don’t exist at varying levels of governance to provide service to the homeless population. The site contains further reasoning for some of the push factors that result in teen homelessness as well as categorization for different cases of teen homelessness depending on the situation that a person finds themselves in. The statistics range from home life and parental attitudes towards kids coming out to alcohol and drug dependence that teens on the street face. Overall, the article paints a clear picture of the numbers behind LGBT teen homelessness to quantify the scale of the issue and how disproportionately LGBTQ teens are affected by heterosexism and homelessness in America.

“[Those Sundays](https://www.lapiscuchamagazine.com/en-blog/2019/3/27/those-sundays)” - Christopher Soto, 2019 (poem)

This is an excerpt from Christopher Soto’s “Sad Girl Poems”. This poem, titled “Those Sundays”, gives a peek into the backstory of the characters that Christopher Soto (also known as Loma) sets in their poems. The poem is able to encapsulate the home environment that the main character faces, showing the working situation of the parents as well as their attitudes towards their child’s journey in finding out their own identity. The poem contains some slurs as well as sexual language, but illustrates the connection that the main character has with Rory and the emotions that they share through their journey and coping mechanisms to deal with the pain that the world places on them. This text provides the experience that LGBTQ teens face while on the cusp of homelessness in a new outlet, employing poetic language to deepen the display of emotion the characters face as well as connect the reader to the pain in a more personal way by allowing them to illustrate the experiences in their own mind and empathize with the character in a unique way.

“[Where Poetry Meets LGBTQ Homelessness](https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/poetry-meets-lgbtq-youth-homelessness/)” - Joshua Jennifer Espinoza, 2016 (interview)

This website consists of an interview between Espinoza and Loma (Chirstopher Soto), the poet behind the “Sad Girl Poems” included within this text set. Both Espinoza and Loma are “young, trans, latinx poets from Southern California,” who share in their experiences and life lessons that have contributed to their poetry. A large portion of the interview talks about what Loma decided to include from her own life in her poetry and what has been fictionalized in order to capture the larger experience of LGBTQ youth. Loma responds with her goal to include a more holistic view for the readers to be able to have a more “digestible” for the readers. Nevertheless, the experiences that Loma includes within her book are experiences from close friends of hers. Overall, the interview allows for an inside look of what experiences inspired Loma to create the Sad Girl Poems and what the intent of the project is for the audience as a whole.

“[An Intimate Portrait of NYC’s Black, Queer, Homeless Youth](https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/film-2/an-intimate-portrait-of-nycs-black-queer-homeless-youth/)” - Matt Turner, 2020 (magazine article / interview)

This article from Huck Magazine interview Elegance Bratton, the director of “Pier Kids”, a nonfiction film that looks into the lives of those living in queer communities of color in New York City, as Bratton did himself for ten years. Bratton discusses his life story and the family situation that led him to become homeless and live on the Christopher Street Pier, where he finally came to feel as if he belonged with the community. The interview also delves into Bratton’s personal history with joining the army and going to college as well as when he felt called to return to New York City to begin developing this film to tell the stories of those who live in these communities. The interview also includes Bratton’s own feelings towards the steps that America has taken to fight for LGBTQ rights, but how the intersectionality of racism and heterosexism has restricted Bratton from being able to attain and celebrate these rights. The article fully brings together one person’s experience with homelessness as a teen as well as the importance that it played in their life, bringing them to work to show this experience to others through film.

**Memo:**

When it comes to talking about oppressive topics in society with teenagers, many discussions may feel as though they are referring to the world at large, a world that teenagers themselves are not completely engaged in yet. For this reason, discussing oppressive “-isms” that are directly affecting people the same age gives every student some relatable attachment to the issue. It can bring students closer to the problem to know that other teenagers are actively dealing with fighting these forms of oppression to this day. Therefore, discussing LGBTQ teen homelessness with high school students provides a tangible and engaging atmosphere for students to begin to tackle these ideas. In this way, systemic oppression and how it affects those in society can be viewed as a very real issue rather than an “adult” problem to students.

The question that the students should be asked centers on the cause, or *causes*, of a problem whose effects seem life-altering to those who may have an otherwise stable homelife: *What pushes LGBTQ teens into homelessness at such disproportional rates?* The question itself already addresses the multi-faceted nature of the problem at hand. The ‘What pushes’ aspect of the question asks the students to determine what would cause such oppression to exist in the society in the first place. As discussed in his course “Social Oppression and Transformation”, Professor Scott Seider states that oppression within in a society consists of a “Dominant group” and a “Targeted group” in which the dominant group, which does not necessarily need to consist of the majority of a population, controls the norms of a society in order to oppress members of the targeted group (Seider, 1/24/22). This definition is then brought into the next part of the question which states that “LGBTQ teens” are the targeted group in this situation. Stating that the targeted group consists of members whose key difference from the rest of society is their sexual orientation already presents the type of oppression that is being discussed: heterosexism. Also discussed by Professor Seider, heterosexism can be a tricky term in discussion when it comes to differentiating it from homophobia or sexual prejudice. In Gregory Herek’s 2004 paper *Beyond “Homophobia”; Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-First Century*, Herek defines heterosexism as, “the systems that provide the rationale and operating instructions for… the antipathy toward that which is not heterosexual…[including beliefs that] homosexuality and sexual minorities are defined as deviant, sinful, and threatening.” (Herek, 2004). From this, students are able to grasp that there is some form of oppression that society places on LGBTQ teens because of heterosexual norms that exist. These can be discussed in length as for why students believe these societal norms exist and where they came from, but these questions only scratch the surface of the *cause* of an issue. In this question, what is most pertinent is one specific *result* of this form of oppression.

The final portion of the question discusses this specific result, stating that the effect of heterosexism is that LGBTQ teens face homelessness. Not only does this mean that these teenagers must face losing a home simply because of their identity, but it also calls into question the secondary effects that homelessness can cause such as losing family and the support that they bring, being exposed to the elements and diseases because of a lack of shelter, as well as drug use and other hostilities that are present on the street. Not only do students discuss the specific result of homelessness, but they also will try to unpack the “disproportional rate” at which it happens. From the readings, students will learn about the key disproportionalities in the statistics of homelessness between LGBTQ people and those who do not identify as LGBTQ. One key statistic to begin with is from a survey performed by the Trevor Project which found that, “29% of LGBTQ youth have experienced homelessness, been kicked out, or run away”. (Trevor Project, 2020). Looking at the question merely at a surface level may make someone associate identifying as LGBTQ as being a precursor for homelessness, but open discussion of this topic as well as looking at the readings associated with many different teenagers’s experiences makes one realize that many teens are driven to *choose* to become homeless because they feel it is their best or only option in life at that point. This side of the question seems problematic, but it is a necessary reality for the students to understand in order for the question to resonate with them on a deeper level because they come to understand that this issue is preventable, but it requires a societal change. Therefore, if it has not happened yet, students will become fully engaged with the topic once they understand that even their own personal reactions and decisions can have an impact on the lives of others. Namely, whether people they know feel that they have a support system in their family and friends or if they feel they need to escape their current situation and become homeless.

Creating an atmosphere where students feel fully engaged around an otherwise uncomfortable topic of discussion creates the sense of urgency and importance needed to formulate solutions on small and large scales. Though heterosexism affecting LGBTQ teens is a national and even global form of oppression, it can still have impacts and solutions on the local level. An example of this can be seen in the discussion of the history of Boston College’s environment towards LGBTQ students and faculty, as discussed in Connor Murphy’s 2016 article *Walk the Line: A History of the LGBTQ Community at Boston College*, in a Boston College classroom. One quote from the article referred to a letter written by part of the Boston College community which was a “statement of solidarity with alumni who… feel like BC was not their home.” (Murphy, 2016). This instance showcases how students in a community were affected by the heterosexist norms within the school that made them feel unwanted. In a discussion post related to this article made up of current Boston College students, the responses were engaged with the issues at hand and oftentimes frustrated at the lack of progress that has been made towards making Boston College a better place for all. One student compared looking at the history of Boston College’s outlook on LGBTQ identity on campus to researching other local levels of LGBTQ history in the state of Massachusetts, discussing from a previous article the importance of “first [looking] at queer activism and history right here…learning and understanding more about queer activism and its history at BC is ectremely powerful.” (Heterosexism discussion post, 2022). These examples show how discussing the experiences of those who have something in common with students, whether it be their age or where they go to school, can help bring a classroom closer in relation to a topic and increase engagement with the discussion. When tackling the topics and looking at the personal experiences that the texts within this module have, students will find themselves asking the harder questions surrounding this topic of oppression and investigating how they can become more involved in exploring solutions to combat heterosexism and homelessness faced by LGBTQ people their age.

For the included readings, the array of texts and other forms of media are included in a certain order to allow students to become familiar with the reality and statistics of the situation of LGBTQ homelessness first before encountering different forms of personal experiences of those who have faced homelessness. The first text that students should read in order to learn about the background of LGBTQ teen homelessness and see how it affects people on the individual level is Brandon Robinson’s “Coming Out to the Streets”. This text serves as a quintessential example of the story that many LGBTQ youth face and the underlying societal pressures that force them into situations of homelessness. This reading would be the best to begin a unit on LGBTQ teen homelessness because it introduces readers to a personal story but then backs up that story with the realities of the situation of homelessness today. This provides important background information that can prepare students for the lessons, discussions, and dialogue that are to come in the rest of the texts. While many of these texts can be based on opinions of those who have lived the homeless experience as LGBTQ teens, it is important to prepare the students with important information relevant to the national experience of teen homelessness and the common themes that will present themselves throughout the lesson. For this same reason, the next text that students should read comes from Lesley University, titled “The Cost of Coming Out: LGBT Youth Homelessness.” This site works in combination with Robinson’s article to provide very factual evidence behind the LGBTQ teen homelessness epidemic that makes the problem impossible to ignore. It shows beyond a doubt that LGBTQ teens are disporportionately affected by society which drives them towards homelessness and drug use as well as poorer mental health. Again, understanding the statistics behind the issue can act as a sobering wake up call to the seriousness of the situation.

Yet, when discussing topics that are very personal and deal with people’s lives, it is important to not always merely get wrapped up in articles and statistics, but also to experience the emotion of the topic. Poetry is a beautiful way to understand the emotions that are behind these stories. Christopher Soto’s poem, “Those Sundays”, gives a background story that allows the reader to come to understand the experience of heterosexism for themselves. Soto does not include all of the details of their experience, but only includes an artistically appropriate amount of words that paints a more descriptive image than any paragraph could. For example, it does not need to be said that drugs are an outlet that the kids feel they need to use in order to escape the realities that they are faced with, the reader can empathize with these facts for themselves just from the sparse introduction that they are given. The teenage characters in the poem are sticking together purely for survival, and that relationship can devolve quickly because of the ugliness of the world that they are placed in. It is important to receive these stories in varied ways in order to capture the emotion behind them in ways that normal words cannot. Following this poem, another text that is included is an interview with Soto by Joshua Jennifer Espinoza, titled “Where Poetry Meets LGBTQ Homelessness.” The interview gives more of an inside perspective on the poetry after the students have read it for themselves. Both Soto and Espinoza are transgender poets from the Southern California area and the interview allows them to compare and contrast their art and experiences with their identity and the way that society has shaped their views on the world around them.

Finally, the last text is titled “An Intimate Portrait of NYC’s Black, Queer, Homeless Youth”, written by Matt Turner. This article carries a few truly important quotes within it. One being that Bratton describes the pier he lived at as somewhere that finally felt like home because everyone accepted him for who he was and he felt like he belonged there. He states that, “It all dovetailed in on me whilst thinking about these ideas about home, and realizing that the Pier was the one place I feel comfortable answering these questions. I looked around and I realised that this was because this place was filled with people like me: people of colour; homeless kids; Black, queer kids. I realized that home is the place where one is most deeply understood, and this is the one place in the world where I can just walk out and suddenly everyone understands who I am and why I’m there.” (Turner 2020). Overall, this article tackles the term ‘homelessness’ to look at what a home means to a person and the difficulties that someone must face that pushes them to leave their families and the rejection that they face everyday. This article also serves as a success story that shows the positive stories that come out of the atrocities of heterosexism and the pandemic of teen LGBTQ homelessness. It is important to provide a story that turned out successfully in order to show that, despite this issue continuing to oppress LGBTQ teens and adults across the country, there are solutions and beauty in the victories that people can achieve. This article works to sum up what the others have discussed by putting more names to the statistics introduced early on, but also showing that the same teenagers who face these issues can succeed in life and help others with their experience. It will hopefully provide optimism for the students to further discuss solutions that society can implement in order to end LGBTQ youth homelessness.

Overall, LGBTQ teen homelessness is a serious and disproportionate issue that many people across the U.S. have faced and will continue to face due to the heterosexist society that exists. Engaging high school students with the facts behind this issue as well as the personal stories that exists in many different forms can influence their engagement with the topic in order to create an environment that creates solutions for those who are the same age as the students in the classroom but face a much different reality because of how society treats them. With this pressing question and the texts provided, students will be able to have a serious look at the topic and discuss the causes and effects of the issue and how they can be resolved.

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