

# **LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers: creating equitable and affirming systems of care**

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## **LGBTQIA+ youth in foster care**

Examination of the risks and challenges experienced by LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender, queer and questioning) foster youth is an important area of focus for researchers. In addition to being disproportionately represented in foster care (Wilson and Kastanis, 2015; Fish et al, 2019), LGBTQIA+ youth face discrimination, mistreatment and rejection in relation to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression (SOGIE) both within and outside of the child welfare system. Although studies on LGBTQIA+ care leavers are scarce, it is reasonable to assume that disparities in health and wellbeing may be exacerbated for these youth when compared to their non-LGBTQIA+ peers. For instance, difficulties that are commonly experienced by youth in the general population of foster-care-leavers such as lower levels of educational attainment, unemployment, economic instability and poor health may be compounded for LGBTQIA+ youth during their transition to young adulthood (Courtney et al, 2011).

Despite the paucity of research, there is some evidence to suggest that LGBTQIA+ former foster youth are at substantially higher risk than heterosexual and cisgender youth for experiencing problems such as homelessness and diminished mental, physical and sexual health after leaving care. Indeed, evidence finds that LGBTQIA+ care leavers are over-represented in populations of homeless youth, and as a result, often engage in survival crimes (for example, sex work, theft, drugs sales) to pay for basic necessities (Freeman and Hamilton, 2008; Wilson and Kastanis, 2015; Irvine and Canfield, 2016; Forge et al, 2018). Capous-Desyllas and Mountz (2019) also noted a high prevalence of substance use and mental health issues in their study exploring the experiences of LGBTQIA+ former foster youth of colour.

LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers may also experience greater levels of disconnection from systems of support. For instance, youth exiting the foster care system often face the transition to adulthood at an earlier time period

and with fewer support persons in their lives than their peers in the general population (Collins et al, 2010). Again, although research on this population is limited, qualitative studies exploring the experiences of LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers mirror these results. Two studies revealed that in addition to having difficulty accessing safe, knowledgeable and affirming caregivers, LGBTQIA+ youth may not receive the types of support they need for healthy development and functioning (for example, gender-affirming medical care, connection to the LGBTQIA+ community) (Capous-Desyllas and Mountz, 2019; Paul, 2020).

Overall, more research is needed to gain a better understanding of the needs, experiences and outcomes of LGBTQIA+ care leavers. Specifically, the majority of existing studies have been conducted in the United States, resulting in gaps in understanding about how these youth are faring in other countries (Kaasbøll et al, 2022). Additionally, there is a significant need for research that investigates the demographics of these youth, as well as the factors that may increase or decrease their exposure to various risks and challenges. For example, little is known about the health and wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ youth after exiting care, or if/how these outcomes may differ among specific sub-populations of these youth (for example, youth of colour, trans and nonbinary youth) (Burwick et al, 2014). There is also a need for research that examines the extent to which policies and practices have been implemented to protect and support LGBTQIA+ care leavers, and if so, how effective they are at addressing these youths' needs. Advances in research in these areas would greatly improve the knowledge base for working with LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers, and in turn, offer insights that may help to mitigate risks and provide more inclusive systems of care.

## Shifting from risk to resilience

While research highlighting adversities is integral to understanding the experiences of LGBTQIA+ care leavers, it is also important to identify and promote the ways in which this population may be resilient to these risks and challenges. Broadly, resilience is defined as the capacity of individuals, families and communities to successfully find the resources they need to overcome adverse conditions and help them achieve health and wellbeing (Fleming and Ledogar, 2008; Ungar, 2008). It should also be noted that the meanings and manifestations (that is, processes) of resilience are reflexive, such that patterns in the development of resilience vary across political, social, economic, and environmental cultures and contexts (Masten, 2018). In other words, resilience patterns among LGBTQIA+ youth leaving foster care are likely to be different than those of youth in the general population. Therefore, interventions designed to promote resilience among these youth must be culturally and contextually relevant to them.

Resilience research is an emerging area of study among scholars focused on improving adolescent health and the development of LGBTQIA+ youth in foster care. Only a few studies have sought to identify how LGBTQIA+ foster youth engage in resilience processes or how this might impact their transition from care. One particularly salient study in the Netherlands highlighted several ways in which LGBTQIA+ foster youth displayed resilience (González-Álvarez et al, 2022). Specifically, youth relied on themselves as well as their relationships with others (peers, family, friends) to help them navigate and prevail over the challenges they faced. Additionally, these youth were able to locate resources that offered them pathways for exploring, developing and affirming their identities. Youth also talked about how their involvement in activism and civic engagement offered meaning and purpose and provided them with opportunities to give back to others. Some youth even found positive adaptations within themselves to overcome harmful attitudes and behaviours in situations where support from social workers, caregivers and others were lacking.

In another study, Paul (2018) documented that LGBTQIA+ youth who were in the process of leaving foster care managed safety and exposure to risk by relying on a variety of different strategies for evaluating the supportiveness of practitioners and caregivers in their lives. Most youth were open to having relationships with adults that were directly affirming of, responsive to, or knowledgeable about people that identify as LGBTQIA+. Less explicitly, some youth reported that they were more willing to trust adults that were persistent and patient (“She just didn’t give up on me”), open to learning (“They was very new to everything, but they was respectful at the same time”), and seemed genuine or had a good ‘vibe’ (“It was just how she presented herself. I could tell she was a nice lady. You know how you can see a good spirit?”). Others expressed that being confident and open about their LGBTQIA+ identities made it easier for them to establish connections with adults, because they were not ashamed or afraid of how adults might treat them (*Participant*: “I have to tell them what they need to know [referring to sexuality and gender identity] because pretty much, if I don’t, how they gonna know what to do?” *Interviewer*: “Did you have any concerns about any of them knowing?” *Participant*: “No, I didn’t care. I’m confident in who I am”).

Studies examining house and ballroom communities in the United States also highlight the strength and resourcefulness of LGBTQIA+ youth – many of whom have foster care histories – when supportive resources are absent in formal systems of care. These communities consist of adults and youth, primarily Black and Latinx individuals of various sexual and gender identities, that function much like families. Houses are led by adults that take on parental roles and provide resources, guidance and affirmation to youth that have experienced identity-based rejection and discrimination (Arnold

and Bailey, 2009; Kubicek et al, 2013). Former foster youths' ability to find their way into these communities, which are often hidden from the general public, exemplifies their capacity to be creative and successful in seeking out resources that are uniquely supportive of their intersecting SOGIE, racial and ethnic identities.

Other studies exploring the resilience of LGBTQIA+ youth, albeit not in foster care, have documented their use of social media as a catalyst for resilience. In the absence of support from family, peers and society at-large, many LGBTQIA+ youth have turned to social media to explore their identities, access information about dating and other LGBTQIA+-related issues (for example, sexual health, gender transition), find role models and connect to others that have similar identities/experiences (Fox and Ralston, 2016). Researchers have also documented how LGBTQIA+ youth have used online networks to share their knowledge with others such as participating in debates or providing education and insight about their identities or experiences (Asakura, 2016; Robinson and Schmitz, 2021).

In sum, although risk-based research has been instrumental in helping to create policies and practices that seek to prevent and minimise harm towards LGBTQIA+ care leavers, solely focusing on risk limits our ability to understand the ways in which these youth develop adaptive strategies and achieve positive outcomes. Alternatively, studies examining the strengths and resourcefulness of LGBTQIA+ care leavers can help to highlight their many successes in navigating the transition from foster care to young adulthood and may be used to develop programming that promotes and contributes to these strengths. A focus on resiliency may also help to create a positive sense of identity, encourage adaptive coping skills and lead to furthering supportive connections, relationships and community involvement among these youth (González-Álvarez et al, 2022). To this end, this chapter examines how we can continue to reduce exposure to the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers, while also engaging in efforts to recognise and facilitate their strengths and resilience.

## Theoretical frameworks and perspectives

Four theoretical frameworks are central to exploring this question and for improving the lives of LGBTQIA+ youth leaving foster care: minority stress, life course and resilience theories, and anti-oppressive practice.

### *Minority stress theory*

Minority stress theory has heavily influenced how we think about the impact of oppressive social environments on LGBTQIA+ populations over the last few decades. The theory suggests that LGBTQIA+ individuals experience

increased psychological distress as a result of both direct and indirect forms of discrimination and victimisation associated with their sexual and/or gender minority statuses (Meyer, 2003; Hendricks and Testa, 2012). Direct stressors are external to the individual and include experiences such as targeted violence, harassment and microaggressions. Indirect stressors, such as guilt, isolation, shame and fear, are internalised forms of stress and are often connected to the individual's direct experiences of sexual orientation and/or anti-transgender-based discrimination. Expressly, this theory proposes that ongoing exposure to direct forms of psychological distress may lead LGBTQIA+ individuals to conceal their identities, function in a state of hypervigilance, and experience negative feelings in connection to being LGBTQIA+, which can result in longer-term deficits in health and wellbeing.

### *Life course theory*

The life course model considers how historical, geographic, political, community and family contexts shape the development and functioning of individuals over time (Elder, 1998). Within these contexts, scholars of life course theory focus attention on the impact of transitions and/or events that may produce serious and long-lasting effects over the life span. Each transition or event has the potential to serve as a 'turning point', or a major change that alters the life trajectory of the individual, whether positively or negatively (Elder, 1998; White and Wu, 2014; Hutchison, 2019). This approach is central to how we think about LGBTQIA+ care leavers in that it allows for consideration about the connection between LGBTQIA+ young people's experiences within the foster care system, and the structural, social and cultural contexts in which their lives unfold over time.

### *Resilience theory*

Resilience models help to conceptualise the ways in which LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers are able to successfully navigate the challenges they face. Although operational definitions and measures of resilience have varied over time, many resilience science scholars have shifted towards an integrative, systems-based perspective (Masten, 2018). Specifically, this framework suggests that human development is impacted by multiple levels of dynamic, interacting and interdependent systems (inter-individual, intra-individual, socio-ecological) and that adaptive functioning occurs in response to factors that exist within and among these systems (for example, socioeconomic status, health behaviours, biology, laws/policies, family, education, social connections) (Liu et al, 2017). Positive or negative adaptations to adversity can impact how well LGBTQIA+ care leavers are able to communicate,

access emotional support, establish and maintain relationships, and engage in other life skills as young adults. Further, as LGBTQIA+ care leavers continue to face challenges throughout the lifecycle, so do their capacities for resilience.

### *Anti-oppressive practice perspective*

The anti-oppressive practice (AOP) perspective focuses on decreasing the harmful effects of structural and systemic inequality on people's lives by centering the needs of marginalised groups and capitalising on their strengths and resilience to reduce the negative effects of their environments (Dominelli, 1996; Strier and Binyamin, 2014). An AOP perspective shifts the focus from deficit-based approaches to those that focus on how marginalised communities engage in unique and creative ways to overcome a variety of adverse experiences. For example, social work practitioners that use an AOP approach seek to engage clients in their own liberation and that of others through individual and collective empowerment practices such as participatory action – which includes a range of activities that enable individual to play an active and influential role in shaping the decisions that affect their lives (Christian and Jhala, 2015). Incorporating the knowledge and experiences of LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers increases our ability to solve problems and develop interventions that make positive differences in the lives of these youth (Jones, 2004).

When considered together, these theoretical lenses offer an overall framework for understanding how experiences of discrimination may impact the health and wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ foster youth over time, as well as to inform efforts to provide safe, supportive and appropriate care and services that build upon their strengths and resilience. Specifically, inclusion of the minority stress theory is important for recognising that normative criteria for health may not be appropriate for conceptualising the positive adaptations of LGBTQIA+ foster youth. In considering this, minority stress helps to highlight how resilience manifests in the ways that LGBTQIA+ youth navigate discrimination and oppression in their daily lives to achieve greater wellbeing (Asakura, 2019).

Likewise, AOP and resilience theories exemplify the ways in which social workers should recognise the capacity of LGBTQIA+ foster youth to learn and grow. These perspectives not only reinforce the inherent dignity and worth of LGBTQIA+ foster youth, a key value of the social work profession (NASW, 2021), but also creates awareness among youth about their current situations and the need to take action that is necessary in making the successful transition from foster care to young adulthood. Finally, life course theory reminds us how LGBTQIA+ youths' experiences in adolescence are linked to their developmental processes and outcomes, both now and in the future. Thus, prevention and intervention efforts used to understand

and support LGBTQIA+ youth leaving care have lifelong implications for their health and wellbeing.

## **Structural approaches to protecting and supporting LGBTQIA+ youth**

Failure among child welfare systems to cultivate and implement methods that identify, understand and address the needs and experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth contributes to the challenges these youth face both during and after they leave care. In response, several child welfare professionals, advocacy organisations and researchers have developed recommendations for improving systems of care for LGBTQIA+ youth (Marksamer et al, 2011; Burwick et al, 2014; Martin et al, 2016; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016a, 2016b; McCormick, 2018; Ashley et al, 2020; Paul, 2020; Mallon, 2021; Shelton and Mallon, 2021). As outlined in what follows, these endorsements include legal and institutional strategies (for example, improvements to research, policy and data collection), as well as individual- and agency-level strategies (for example, training and coaching) to protect LGBTQIA+ foster youth and improve their levels of health, safety and wellbeing.

### ***Research and evaluation***

Research is critical for helping us to develop knowledge-building tools and resources, and informs our approaches to policy, programme and practice (Burwick et al, 2014; Mallon, 2018). Despite these benefits, research regarding LGBTQIA+ youth in foster care, and those leaving care as young adults, is still relatively limited, particularly among sub-populations such as trans and nonbinary youth and youth of colour. Although scholars are making some important advancements, more studies are needed to fully understand the specific needs and experiences of this population and how other characteristics (for example, race, class) may be linked to short- and longer-term life outcomes (Tilbury and Thoburn, 2009; Grooms, 2020). Ongoing measurement of the effectiveness of services provided to LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers is also needed to help inform our decisions about whether care and services are reaching their intended goals, and what, if any, alterations need to be made (Burwick et al, 2014). Such information is necessary for holding government organisations, public and private funding agencies accountable to making measurable, positive differences in the lives of these youth.

### ***Policies and guidelines***

At the most basic level, policies and guidelines that prevent anti-LGBTQIA+ harassment/victimisation and address existing disparities are essential for

providing LGBTQIA+ care leavers with equitable care and services. Indeed, LGBTQIA+ foster youth should receive fair and appropriate treatment and be protected from harassment and abuse at the same level as heterosexual and cisgender youth in care (Weeks et al, 2018). This includes making sure that they have access to safe and supportive placements, programmes and services, and that mistreatment directed at LGBTQIA+ youth is appropriately addressed (Paul et al, 2023). Public systems should also ensure that LGBTQIA+ foster youth experience freedom from religious indoctrination and the right to freely express themselves (McCormick, 2018). Additionally, guidance is needed to help child welfare agencies and social work professionals carry out regulatory protections, develop high-quality policy and practice models, and ultimately, leverage national and local funding.

### *Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression data collection*

The need for national and regional governments to include SOGIE information as a part of administrative data collection is critical. Without this data, it is difficult to identify the actual number of LGBTQIA+ youth involved in foster care, or to adequately meet their safety, permanency and wellbeing needs. Conversely, having access to SOGIE data could greatly improve our capacity to conduct needed research on LGBTQIA+ youth leaving care, and potentially, various diverse sub-groups within this population. Agencies would also benefit from express guidelines about how to properly collect and safeguard SOGIE data, as well as how to use this data to assess and serve LGBTQIA+ youth and their families (Martin et al, 2016). Although some governments include SOGIE measures as part of their administrative data collection, many public child welfare agencies do not collect this information from youth (Martin et al, 2016).

### *Mandated training*

Despite increases in societal awareness and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals, requiring specialised education and training about the needs, experiences and development of LGBTQIA+ foster youth may help to ensure that practitioners have access to the knowledge, skills and resources necessary to care for this population (McCormick, 2018; Weeks et al, 2018; Paul, 2020). Although more research is needed regarding recommendations for content and format, a few studies suggest the importance of using a bilateral curriculum (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016a, 2016b; Weeks et al, 2018). Bilateral curriculum includes:

1. instruction on inclusive language, recognising anti-LGBTQIA+ bias and behaviors, LGBTQIA+ identity development, increasing safety and



- permanency, managing information related to SOGIE status, and the legal framework for LGBTQIA+ youth in care; and
- 2. workshops and coaching to assist practitioners in the practical application of knowledge and skills.

Evidence regarding the effectiveness of this curriculum suggests that both components must be implemented to reduce bias attitudes and behaviours and increase practitioners' capacity to engage in supportive and affirming practices (Weeks et al, 2018).

### *Universally safe, inclusive and affirming resources and environments*

One of the most significant challenges LGBTQIA+ care leavers face is having access to care and services that are safe, appropriate and affirming of who they are. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, numerous studies have shown that LGBTQIA+ youth may experience rejection and mistreatment by the very individuals whose job it is to provide them with care, including child welfare case managers, foster parents and caregivers (Mallon, 1998; Woronoff et al, 2006; Gallegos et al, 2011; Wilson et al, 2015; Mountz et al, 2018; Paul, 2020). As a result, LGBTQIA+ youth may experience added traumas and suffer from a lack of access to resources that are needed to support their healthy development and functioning.

Alternatively, having access to culturally responsive caregivers and services provides LGBTQIA+ care leavers with a greater chance of achieving positive outcomes in adulthood (Higa et al, 2014; Russell and Fish, 2016). Examples of such care include ensuring that:

1. practitioners and caregivers actively demonstrate a sense of respect and understanding towards LGBTQIA+ youth;
2. youth are placed into safe, permanent homes with stable, nurturing families; and
3. resource and service provisions are universally appropriate and affirming of youth with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, including those that are in the process of exploring this aspect of themselves, or are not out to others (McCormick et al, 2018; Paul, 2018, 2020; Mallon, 2021; Shelton and Mallon, 2021).

### **Critical approaches for working with LGBTQIA+ care leavers**

The development and implementation of the aforementioned strategies almost certainly improve our capacity to service LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers. However, it is essential that social service organisations and caregivers also concentrate on practice approaches that recognise the

unique needs of these youth, accept them unconditionally, and place youth at the centre of every process (Baines, 2011; Christian and Jhala, 2015). Informed by the minority stress, life course, resilience and anti-oppressive practice frameworks, this section highlights critically based, mindful practice approaches that public child welfare systems and caregivers should consider in order to fully support LGBTQIA+ youth leaving care. It should be also noted these strategies draw heavily on US/Global North experiences and are not offered in a peremptory manner, but rather, to promote critical attention – that has long been absent – towards the experiences and needs of LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers wherever they are located globally. Notably, the strategies documented within this section, while critical for promoting equitable and affirming care to LGBTQIA+ care leavers, may also be useful in supporting a variety of marginalised populations of youth leaving care.

### *Strengths and empowerment-based practices*

Focusing on practices that recognise strengths and highlight the resilience of LGBTQIA+ care leavers helps build their capacity to adapt to conflict-laden life experiences and avoids working with them from a deficit-based lens. Strengths-based practice also compels practitioners to work closely with LGBTQIA+ care leavers to collectively solve problems and meet co-created goals (Singh et al, 2014). To this end, practitioners should seek to involve youth in the process of developing their own care plans, identifying and accessing supports and services, and managing their lives. Such an approach empowers youth to have a say in decisions that affect their lives and provides them with opportunities to build stronger and more trusting relationships with the individuals and organisations that are entrusted with their care (Asakura, 2016). Moreover, working alongside youth as partners can lead to increased levels of confidence and self-esteem, positive changes in beliefs and attitudes about the future, improvements in development and functioning, and ultimately, better life outcomes (Blank et al, 2009).

### *Building and enhancing supportive networks*

One way to build the empowerment of LGBTQIA+ youth is to provide them with opportunities to bolster their formal and informal support networks, both in and outside the child welfare system. Social support is tied to resilience for LGBTQIA+-identified youth through its ability to lower reactivity to prejudice and contribute to identity development and emotional wellbeing (Kwon, 2013; Poteat et al, 2016). Specifically, studies document that support distinct to sexual orientation and gender identity reduces levels of emotional distress, acts as a protective factor against the harmful effects of stigma and discrimination-related stress on psychological wellbeing, and is

closely connected to outcomes related to positive adjustment (for example, life situation, LGBTQIA+ self-esteem) (Doty et al, 2010; Snapp et al, 2015).

A potential tool for partnering with LGBTQIA+ care leavers to enhance their access to supportive resources is the ‘Support Systems Ecomap for LGBTQIA+ Youth’ (Paul, 2021). The tool helps youth and practitioners in engage in focused knowledge-building for the purpose of identifying and enhancing LGBTQIA+ youths’ access to different types of support. Co-constructing the ecomap also encourages youth to critically reflect on the strength and structure of their support systems by teaching them to actively explore, identify and address any resource and relational challenges that arise in their lives (Correa et al, 2011). Additionally, the tool may help to facilitate productive dialogue by increasing practitioners’ levels of competence and comfort in discussing identity-related issues with LGBTQIA+ youth and fostering further trust between the youth and the practitioner.

### *Trauma-informed care*

Given LGBTQIA+ foster youths’ increased exposure to bias and mistreatment, some scholars have suggested that it is necessary for practitioners to engage in a trauma-informed approach when working with this population (McCormick, 2018; Mallon, 2020). Although there are numerous definitions, existing literature consistently refers to trauma as an event or a series of events that is/are experienced as psychologically damaging, threatening or overwhelming to the individual (Goodman, 2017). Trauma-informed care is a service-delivery approach in which practitioners engage in emotionally supportive practices that focus on safety, empowerment and restoring a sense of control – a method that has shown success in working with adolescents that have been exposed to high rates of victimisation and violence (Ko et al, 2008). This includes creating an atmosphere that is respectful to LGBTQIA+ youths’ need for security, respect and acceptance, and understanding the need to minimise the potential for traumatisation (Elliott et al, 2005; Mallon, 2020). Responses that fail to understand the context of LGBTQIA+ youths’ lives and experiences can inadvertently elicit a trauma response such as psychological reactivity, engagement in risky behaviours, suicidal ideation and self-harm (Butler et al, 2011).

Trauma-informed care should focus on working with families to increase their levels of acceptance around the youth’s SOGIE, furthering one’s understanding the interrelationship between trauma and symptoms of trauma, and integrating knowledge about and responses to trauma into policies, procedures and practices (Butler et al, 2011; McCormick, 2018). Caregivers and practitioners should also actively engage in the processes of critical self-awareness and reflection to ensure that their practices with LGBTQIA+ care leavers are appropriate and affirming. Such practices

include, but are not limited to, using youths' chosen name and pronouns, responding immediately to instances of harassment and victimisation, and helping youth gain access to safe and affirming resources and services.

### *Positive youth development*

In relation to a trauma-informed approach, it is essential for social work professionals to focus on positive youth development (PYD) as a means for supporting and affirming LGBTQIA+ youth leaving foster care. PYD approaches help to ensure that programmes and practices are relevant and accessible to LGBTQIA+ youth, promote their strengths, and provide for the continuity of services in an environment of limited resources. Practitioners can also engage in PYD practices by developing a working knowledge of the LGBTQIA+ community's needs and resources and by initiating the involvement of community members in programme development and the delivery of services (Mancini and Marek, 2004). Creating a shared vision and working with key stakeholders within the LGBTQIA+ community helps us to better understand the experiences of LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers and identify the best approaches for meeting their needs. Moreover, engagement with the LGBTQIA+ community can lead to improved youth outcomes, increase the chance of programmatic success, and broaden participation and investment in the lives of these youth beyond the child welfare system.

Efforts should also include collaboration with LGBTQIA+ youth-serving organisations that seek to engage LGBTQIA+ youth in healthy and productive ways and use methods that recognise and enhance their strengths. These agencies are also uniquely positioned to foster resilience among LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers by connecting them to others with similar backgrounds and experiences (Gamarel et al, 2014). In addition, PYD efforts can be promoted by connecting youth to student-led, school-based initiatives, such as Gender and Sexuality Alliances and community-service organisations that support LGBTQIA+-based social justice initiatives such as queer youth theatres. Such programmes aim to build a sense of empowerment among LGBTQIA+ youth through reflection and consciousness-raising activities and by providing safe spaces where they can feel supported and freely express themselves (Wernick et al, 2014). They may also improve youth outcomes (for example, psychosocial wellbeing, educational attainment), and in some cases, reduce the negative effects of anti-LGBTQIA+ victimisation on youth wellbeing (Toomey et al, 2011).

Perhaps most importantly, programming for LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers should include strategies that facilitate partnerships between youth and the professionals that provide them with care and services. Such strategies focus on prioritising the perspectives of LGBTQIA+ youth as the primary method for constructing knowledge and developing solutions

to assist the foster care system in providing respectful and responsive care (Capous-Desyllas et al, 2019). Initiatives that focus on ‘youth as experts’ can provide LGBTQIA+ care leavers with the opportunity to develop a sense of empowerment and leadership, while simultaneously advancing programme sustainability (Forenza and Happonen, 2016).

## Conclusion

Historically and contemporaneously, child welfare systems across the globe have yet to fully acknowledge or support LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers. With this goal in mind, this chapter explored how the minority stress, life course, resilience and anti-oppressive frameworks may be used to help conceptualise how experiences of discrimination impact the health and development of these youth over time, and develop research, policy and practice approaches that are theoretically grounded in strengths-based perspectives. In particular, this chapter discussed the need to integrate critically based practice with structural approaches in order to provide a more culturally responsive and effective platform for increasing the health and wellbeing of these youth. A combination of both general and critical approaches not only ensures that LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers have access to effective and affirming care and services, it also helps empower them to challenge, resist and redesign oppressive structures that exist within the foster care system.

In addition to this two-tiered approach, researchers must continue to shift from focusing almost exclusively on the risks and challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers to studies that recognise and build upon youths’ strength and resilience. While risk-related research has provided crucial information for promoting changes to policy and practice, the lack of research on resilience processes has resulted in a predominantly deficit-based approach for working with LGBTQIA+ youth in foster care. Alternatively, resilience research helps us to understand the ways in which these youth cope and thrive, despite the adversities they face. Together, these paradigm shifts offer the chance to move beyond traditional methods of research and practice to more progressive and effective strategies for assisting LGBTQIA+ foster-care-leavers in achieving positive outcomes in young adulthood.

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