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After Houselessness: Queer Youth of Color Severed From Cultural and Spiritual Community

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Working Abstract

There is an apparent gap between the nature of houseless youth services and the need for Queer Youth of Color (QYOC) to rebuild the missing connections resulting from cultural or spiritual rupture, disconnection from their ancestry and community estrangement. As these youth lose their familial connections and support, many find themselves in a precarious place of survival by any means necessary.

In Portland, various programs exist to offer assistance to houseless youth who are in crisis. Programs are focused on helping youth find the essentials, like stable access to food and shelter, or enfranchising and empowering participants. However, these youth are missing a positive connection to spiritual and cultural legacy that will support long term self-efficacy. The goal of the proposed research is to examine these questions: **1** *In what ways do existing programs address disconnection from cultural and spiritual identity?* **2** *To the extent that they do not, what actions will lead to programs that meet these needs?* **3** *What are the medium term results of youth receiving assistance through programs that are not culturally aware?*

Data will be gathered through interviews with QYOC, interviews with program coordinators, volunteers, and houseless youth program staff. Research will explore the intersections of cultural estrangement, mental health, and personal achievement. This research will provide a better understanding of the importance of cultural factors in QYOC advocacy.

Primary Research Question

Within the Portland Oregon Houseless Youth Continuum, to what extent are the particular needs of Queer Youth of Color being served by existing programs?

Indigenous Research Methodology

The classical research approach, which generally seeks to distance the researcher from the subject, is not practical for this study, due to issues around trust and vulnerability. Standard methods are also incompatible with the researcher's values. Instead, an indigenous learning model will be followed. In particular, this requires building meaningful relationships with the participants, rather than eschewing personal connections, and ensuring an equitable return on the valuable information gained from participants, rather than building academic knowledge without also making it accessible to those who can best use it. At a high level, the proposed research method will include these steps:

- Identify all local programs assisting houseless youth
- Identify a meaningful cohort of individuals who have had contact with identified programs
- Use open-ended interviews with cohort to gather;
 1. Cultural and spiritual community needs, and their fulfillment before and after contact with the program(s)
 2. Experiential “ground truth” data relating to cultural relevancy of programs and cultural competency of staff
- Use open-ended interviews with program staff and publications to assess their “nominal” cultural competencies
- Characterize the scope and quality of solutions addressing needs particular to QYOC
- Analyze the gap between the offerings and the identified needs

Consequences of Fractured Ties

Community attachment confers many advantages, including the guidance of elders, family-taught life skills, and even entitlement to financial benefits. Those who undergo traumatic separation from their cultural roots are likely to lose these important resources, which directly reduces their ability to obtain education, maintain relationships, and prosper throughout life.

In addition, feelings of isolation, disconnection, alienation, inadequacy are likely to be significant and lasting, often leading to long-term emotional and mental illness. Without the appropriate tools and skills, many people are unable to avoid falling into crisis; situations of abuse, addiction, crime, poverty, and violence.

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