

Pride
&

POVERTY

**2SLGBTQA+ PEOPLES' STORIES
OF ACCESSING SOCIAL ASSISTANCE
IN TORONTO**

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ASSISTANCE IN TORONTO

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PRIDE & POVERTY

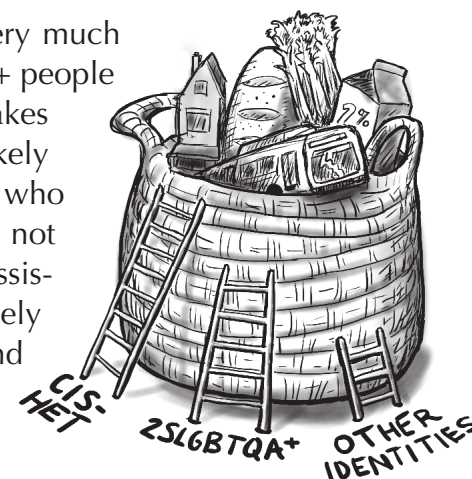
2SLGBTQA+ PEOPLES' STORIES OF
ACCESSING SOCIAL ASSISTANCE
IN TORONTO

A note about language

We use '2SLGBTQA+' as an acronym for sexual and gender minorities. It encompasses Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, and other minorities. While we had hoped to include intersex people in this study, none of our participants identified as intersex, and so we are unable to speak to their experiences. We place "2S" at the beginning in appreciation of the fact that Two-Spirit people were on this land prior to the arrival of settler people. We also do this to mark our commitment to reconciliation in our research. We acknowledge that 'Two-Spirit' is an English-language term and can refer to gender identity, sexual orientation, or other identities.

This zine comes from a research study called *Pride & Poverty*. This community-based, mixed-methods study was conducted by 2SLGBTQA+-identified people, some of whom also had lived experience of poverty. We hoped to find out how to support the health and well-being of 2SLGBTQA+ community members in the Greater Toronto Area who are experiencing poverty, especially their experiences accessing social assistance. We used an online survey, focus groups over Zoom, and telephone interviews.

Although we don't have very much research about 2SLGBTQA+ people and social assistance, it makes sense that we are more likely than cis-het people (people who are straight and who are not trans) to access social assistance. We're both more likely to be living in poverty and more likely to experience disability than cis-het people. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, 22% of 2SLGBTQA+ people in the United States lived in poverty, compared to 16% of cis-het people (The Williams Institute, 2019). There are similar gaps in Canada, which are even more profound for trans people and others who are living at the intersection of marginalized identities or experiences:



- ▼ 40% of trans people in Canada live in a low-income household (Trans PULSE Canada, 2020)
- ▼ 36% of 2SLGBTQA+ people in the United States live with a disability (HRC Foundation, 2020)

These numbers were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, so we don't know how the pandemic has affected these statistics.

HOW DO 2SLGBTQA+ PEOPLE END UP NEEDING SOCIAL ASSISTANCE?

HOME AND FAMILY OF ORIGIN

Sometimes when we are young, we are kicked out of our home or need to leave for safety reasons related to homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and prejudice. We need social assistance to support ourselves and replace the financial support that most cis-het young people get from their families of origin.

"In my experiences and speaking with other queer youth, a lot of us have been disowned by our families, right? So in my case specifically, I was thrown out at the age of 18 and didn't have a family support system. So I was kind of unfortunately forced to access Ontario Works."

– Focus group participant



EMPLOYMENT

Many of us are discriminated against when we're applying for jobs:

"I think a big issue that leads to a disproportionate number of LGBTQ folks receiving assistance is that a lot of jobs are unintentionally homophobic in their hiring practices.

So, what I mean by that is sometimes when you're applying for jobs and stuff like that... I just feel in hiring practices if they see you, a queer folk, in competition with the straight folks, they're more likely to hire a straight folk than they are to hire you because they don't think that you best represent their job or whatever, I don't know."

– Focus group participant

DID YOU KNOW ABOUT THE PURGE? FROM THE 1950S TO THE 1990S THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATED 2SLGBTQA+ PEOPLE WITH SPYING, COMMUNISM, AND VULNERABILITY TO BLACKMAIL. IT SURVEILLED, OUTED, AND FIRED THOUSANDS OF PUBLIC SERVANTS, MOSTLY GAY MEN. ALTHOUGH LESS OVERT, THE DISCRIMINATION THAT MOTIVATED THE PURGE REMAINS IN WORKPLACES TODAY.

When we do get hired, many of us face discrimination and harassment that sometimes forces us out of work again. This can especially happen for those of us whose 2SLGBTQA+ identities intersect with other stigmatized identities and experiences:

"...part of the issues I was having was not feeling like I fit in at work due to feeling like I'm not straight or cis... On top of that, I'm neurodivergent... Things like noise and lighting were constant issues almost everywhere I worked, and they just didn't really take it seriously.

THE “PINK CEILING” DESCRIBES HOW, WHEN 2SLGBTQA+ PEOPLE FIND EMPLOYMENT, WE OFTEN ARE BLOCKED FROM BEING PROMOTED OR ADVANCING FORWARD WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION. THIS KEEPS OUR PAY AND ADVANCEMENT STAGNANT.

could do,’ but not doing much about it... like part of it is just the gender norm expectation, but also not even like a lot of like, unfortunately, when you’re already dealing with stress, like I feel like even the little things like noises and things affect you even more...”

– Focus group participant

Like they put me next to a noisy printer. And when I said that was an issue... their response was pretty much like, ‘Oh yeah ok,’ and then, ‘We’ll see what we

We also face underemployment, sometimes because of the “pink ceiling,” and sometimes because we choose to stay in jobs that feel safe, even when they underpay us.

DISABILITY

Many of us live with disabilities that make employment unsuitable or impossible for us. For many of us, these disabilities are



connected to our experiences of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and other discrimination we’ve experienced over our lifetimes.

Discrimination can impact us because:

- ▼ It keeps us from getting medical care when we need it
- ▼ If we can’t find a safe job, it makes us take on unsafe work and get injured
- ▼ It forces us into unsafe living conditions that lead to disability
- ▼ It simply takes an ongoing toll on our bodies and minds

THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT IS CONSIDERING A FEDERAL DISABILITY BENEFIT CALLED THE CANADA DISABILITY BENEFIT, BUT WE DON’T YET KNOW WHAT IT WILL LOOK LIKE.

As a result, we are more likely than cis-het people to rely on disability support programs.

POVERTY

2SLGBTQA+ people also experience poverty for many of the same reasons as cis-het people:

- ▼ Intergenerational poverty
- ▼ Caregiving responsibilities that keep us out of the labour market
- ▼ Our education and credentials not being recognized in Canada



But as 2SLGBTQA+ people, these experiences intersect with our experiences of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. This means that we have fewer resources to help us overcome or recover from them. For example, we might not be getting the

same support as cis-het people do from our family of origin, our religious community, or our newcomer community.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE TRY TO ACCESS SOCIAL ASSISTANCE ?

Some of us are never able to access social assistance, and not for lack of trying. This occurs when we don't meet the strict eligibility criteria because our incomes are considered too high. This can happen to some 2SLGBTQA+ people because:

- ▼ We work full-time minimum wage jobs
- ▼ The income counted in our households includes people who aren't supportive of our sexual or gender identities
- ▼ We are self-employed and our incomes fluctuate

Sometimes we just can't make it through all the red tape – the processes are designed to be complicated and confusing, and often there's no one to support us in figuring it out. And sometimes the application process requires documentation that it's not possible or safe for us to get (e.g., from doctors who are transphobic, or from family members who won't support us). If we're in a relationship, sometimes we're not eligible because our partner's income is considered too high. This can leave us with inadequate personal income and sometimes make us vulnerable to intimate partner violence.

For those of us who do get social assistance, it's often far from an easy experience. Many times, we face discrimination from case workers or other people who we need to interact with within the system. This discrimination can take the form of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, but it can also be

racism, sexism, classism, fatphobia, ableism, etc. Often, it's impossible for us to know exactly what's at the root of the way we're being treated. Discrimination frequently means case workers use their power unfairly to withhold needed benefits and supports, or to not share useful information or resources. If we don't perform our identities in ways they expect and are comfortable with, case workers can treat us badly. This can mean we have to "tone down" our queerness, our Blackness, etc. in order to get fair (or as close as possible to fair) treatment.



"When my partner and I had a combined household income of <\$50000, I was told I could only receive \$536 a month because my partner was earning income. This would have left me with \$36 a month after rent."

– Interview participant

"There's a lot of fatphobia...in my experience, it's very multi-layered because it's like my weight is in relation to my income bracket, which is, you know, so it's not just poor life choices, it's just kind of life circumstance..."

– Focus group participant

"...[I]f the worker doesn't like my tone or my body language, they'll punish me by withholding certain resources, not inform you of certain benefits you are entitled to, as well as just being pretty abrasive and hostile due to maybe my race or my sexual orientation."

– Focus group participant

“...It makes me cry... the lack of treating you like a human.”

– Interview participant

“...[E]ven though they’re the ODSP office... there’s nothing there, like I feel like there’s no support whatsoever. I’ve asked certain questions. You’re lucky to get a phone call back. Of course, now all they want to do is through email... I usually like to meet somebody in person. I feel like that’s how I get to know somebody. And I also feel they get to know me...”

– Interview participant

DID YOU KNOW? AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC, CERB ALLOCATED \$2000 PER MONTH TO PEOPLE WHO LOST THEIR INCOME BECAUSE OF THE PANDEMIC. BUT ODSP STILL PAYS JUST \$1169, AND MOST PEOPLE ON ODSP COULDN'T EVEN ACCESS CERB. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHO GETS A LIVEABLE INCOME AND WHO DOESN'T SHOWS HOW MUCH THE ONTARIO GOVERNMENT DEVALUES THOSE ACCESSING SOCIAL ASSISTANCE, PARTICULARLY PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.

“[The Ontario Works office] would mail the cheques separately, so like housing and basic needs, and my mailbox was secure, and my landlord had stolen my rent portion. So, I had to go down to Ontario Works and petition that and try and get them to reissue a cheque... [the worker] was like ‘for the record, I didn’t believe you whatsoever, and I’ve heard from other workers that you’re a difficult client,’ right? So, it’s just like very inappropriate behaviours and almost like pushing [me]

into a corner to retaliate so they [can] get you like, maybe suspended or call the police on the Black aggressor, Black male.”

– Focus group participant



Even once we get the supports we’re eligible for, it’s not enough. For most of us, social assistance doesn’t even cover our basic needs, especially with the high cost of housing in Toronto. The federal Community Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) showed the rest of society and the Canadian government how much money is necessary for a truly liveable income. But ODSP rules mean that if we work more than a certain number of hours per month, our benefits will get clawed back. Or worst-case scenario:

we’re worried that our worker will decide we’re no longer eligible for ODSP. We can’t take that chance because we rely on ODSP for things like access to prescription medication, and we know that we won’t always be well enough to work. The social assistance system makes us feel like we’re trapped in a cycle of poverty and there’s no way out.

STARTING IN FEBRUARY, THE ODSP CAP WAS INCREASED TO \$1000 (FROM \$200). ANYTHING ABOVE THIS IS CLAWED BACK 75% INSTEAD OF THE 50% FROM THE PREVIOUS SCHEME. THERE WAS NO SIGNIFICANT CHANGE TO THE BASE RATES. THIS MEANS IT BENEFITS PEOPLE WHO ARE EMPLOYED, BUT IT BRINGS NO SIGNIFICANT CHANGE TO PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT EMPLOYED.

SO WE PUSH BACK...

We talk back to our internalized shame and recognize that the problem is the system, not us. The system is working exactly as it was intended to. It was never designed to get people out of poverty; it was designed to benefit the economy, not people. In a “race to the bottom,” we’re forced into unsafe living conditions and working conditions just to get by. It’s frustrating and degrading.

But we are resourceful and find ways to manage. We make strategic choices to stretch what we get, we work under the table,



we get support from community organizations, and we support one another. We call out discrimination when we can safely do that. We organize and we educate one another and push for improvements

to the social assistance system. But more importantly, we push to eradicate poverty. We push to eradicate its underlying causes like homophobia, transphobia, ableism, racism, and an exploitative capitalist system that make it necessary for us to access social assistance in the first place.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ▼ Share this zine with others to raise awareness
- ▼ Get together with friends and other 2SLGBTQA+ people to learn about your rights and share strategies. One person alone may know only a little bit, but when we share what we know with others we’re all smarter and stronger. Check out these fact sheets and resources from Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO): <https://www.cleo.on.ca/en/resources-and-publications/income-assistance>
- ▼ Ask a local community organization to sponsor a workshop by the Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC) <https://incomesecurity.org/our-work/public-education/> (click on “Training and Workshops”)
- ▼ Work with governments and employers to follow through on employment equity legislation, and on accessibility and accommodation requirements (e.g., the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, etc.)
- ▼ Join the fight to increase minimum wage, and increase ODSP and OW rates for all
- ▼ Learn techniques for being a more effective advocate with these tools from the Maytree Foundation: <https://maytree.com/maytree-tools/> . Have a watch + learn party with friends!
- ▼ Celebrate when we win – even the small stuff.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

You can visit our study webpage: <https://www.lgbtqhealth.ca/projects/experienceswithsocialassistance.php>

or contact us: prideandpoverty.dlsph@utoronto.ca

You can also check out these organizations and groups that are doing important advocacy work related to social assistance, worker's rights, and poverty:

- ▼ ODSP Action Coalition: twitter.com/ODSPAAction
- ▼ Sistering: sistering.org
- ▼ Workers Action Centre: workersactioncentre.org
- ▼ Decent Work and Health Network: decentworkand-health.org



DO YOU NEED LEGAL ADVICE OR SUPPORT RELATED TO SOCIAL ASSISTANCE?

Certain community legal clinics in Ontario can help individuals who need support advocating in relation to social assistance or other income security issues.

These include:

- ▼ Social Assistance, Violence and Health (SAVAH) at Parkdale Community Legal Services: <https://www.parkdalelegal.org/what-we-do/savah/>
- ▼ The 519's Access to Justice and Legal Initiatives: <https://www.the519.org/programs/access-to-justice/>
- ▼ ARCH Disability Law Centre: (416) 482-8255
- ▼ Income Security Advocacy Centre: (416) 597-5820

It's good to find the clinic that can best answer your questions. This Legal Aid Ontario website has a complete list of specialty legal clinics in Ontario: <https://www.legalaid.on.ca/specialty-clinics/>

This list by CLEO is not as comprehensive but describes the services available: <https://www.cleo.on.ca/en/publications/ontario/specialty-community-legal-clinics>

Tip: It's good to have all of your questions and documents (including the important dates, etc.) in order to explain what you need legal help with.



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