

Rosie Mishaiel:

As one of the most diverse cities in the world, we often celebrate Toronto as a place where people of different backgrounds come together to create a vibrant and eclectic palette of histories and cultures, but even in Toronto, differences can be met with discrimination and unequal treatment. As we have discussed in this series, housing stability and affordability are issues that impact a large number of Torontonians. Certain groups are more vulnerable to these housing issues than others: Indigenous people, newcomers and immigrants, racialized people, youth, seniors, and gender and sexually diverse people, are just a few of the groups in our society that are more likely to experience social and economic inequality. And as a result, they are more likely to experience various housing issues that impact their health. My name is Rosie Mishaiel, and this is Housing and Health: Unlocking Opportunity, a podcast produced by Toronto Public Health.

Rosie Mishaiel:

These podcasts are about housing in Toronto and how it impacts the health and well-being of the people who live here. A warning to listeners, there are sensitive subjects raised in this show, including struggling with thoughts of suicide. If you need support, please contact the Toronto Distress Centre at (416) 408-4357. You'll also hear about experiences of homophobia, racism, and the emotional and physical health impacts of various housing issues. For support related to these issues, please visit [www.toronto.ca](http://www.toronto.ca). The focus of this episode is identity, because parts of your identity – like your ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, age, and socioeconomic status – can influence how people think, perceive, and interact with you. When a person's identity is considered different, they may be subjected to discrimination and disadvantage. And when more than one aspect of a person's identity is discriminated against, the disadvantage adds up. Understanding how forms of oppression related to a person's identity are connected, is called intersectionality.

Rosie Mishaiel:

In this episode, we will talk to two people who have experienced discrimination in Toronto's housing market. First, we spoke with Renel, 23-year-old man who

identifies as Black, bisexual, and Métis. Renel's age, sexual orientation, and race increase the likelihood that he will experience discrimination and disadvantage. Due to poor audio quality, excerpts from Renel's interview will be read by me. Renel has been in subsidized housing for three years, but having a roof over his head hasn't exactly given him a sense of home. He calls his building a jail and that security cameras watch his every move. Before he moved into the building, he was doing quite well, but since then he's battled depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Renel calls his landlord vindictive, but doesn't understand why he's a target. He thinks it could be because of complaints his mother made against the building management in the past, but he also wonders whether his sexuality and race have also made him a target.

Rosie Mishael:

Renel said, "Some people say the manager doesn't like native people. I don't know how true that is. I mean, I'm not full native. As you can see, I'm Black as well. When I first moved in, they said, 'Good luck'". Renel's first run-in with management happened after he had a party in his apartment. Renel says the party was low-key and that even the superintendent came in to have a beer. However, after that night, Renel received his first eviction notice. Even though the eviction was dismissed by the Landlord and Tenant Board, Renel says the notices have not stopped since. He's had to defend himself in front of the Tenant Board several times to avoid eviction. One of the eviction notices arrived after Renel's mother came to visit for a few weeks. He received a letter from the landlord saying he had an unauthorized guest in the apartment. Because they had purchased a few things for the apartment, including a sofa, the landlord tried to suggest she had moved in her belongings.

Rosie Mishael:

When he went to defend himself at a Tenant Board hearing, his own cousin, also a resident of the building, refused to testify on his behalf, afraid that building management would come after her next. "I mean, I have no power. That's how I feel. I have no power." Even though the housing is meant for Indigenous clients, Renel wonders whether the superintendents are racist or homophobic. One of his few

pleasures in life is music and singing, but he's afraid to make noise in his apartment, convinced it will lead to another eviction notice. As Renel said in tears, "It's really hard. It's just the stress. They just constantly try and try and try to get to me all the time." Renel's story illustrates how the constant threat of eviction, harassment and discrimination can negatively impact a person's emotional and mental wellbeing. Clare Nobbs is the former Director of Transitional Housing, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, a Toronto non-profit organization that supports LGBTQ2S+ youth. LGBTQ2S+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirited plus more, and is used to encompass the wide range of gender and sexually diverse communities. Clare says that despite anti-discrimination laws, landlords still and do discriminate against many people.

Clare Nobbs:

Definitely people who face poverty, people who face violence and trauma in their lives at a young age, are going to have a harder time finding housing. I would say along with that, people who are Indigenous and who are racialized Black people, Black youth in our work, Indigenous youth, and newcomers, have a very difficult time because prejudice is rife, even with the law that says they're not allowed to discriminate, landlords find ways to do that. When an individual is also trans-identified, particularly trans women, then there's even more difficulty. Because often when folks, landlords, employers, service providers even, are not experienced, knowledgeable or respectful of trans identities, they will not take that person seriously and they'll receive that individual as if the individual is trying to fool them or somehow telling them a lie about who they are. So they're immediately not trusted and they're immediately disrespected. And trans women in particular face huge amounts of violence and at the very least disrespect in society. And so, homelessness is a huge issue for trans women and trans women of colour, two-spirit people, so Indigenous folks who are LGBTQ2I-identified are facing the most chronic challenges in the city.

Rosie Mishael:

LGBTQ2S+ youth in Toronto are faced with unique challenges. The 2013 Toronto Street Needs Assessment found that youth in shelters across Toronto are twice as likely to identify as LGBTQ2S+. This means they're relying on the shelter system more than their cisgender, heterosexual peers. For many, the root cause of this is the rejection experienced as a result of coming out to their family.

Clare Nobbs:

The young people that we work with have often experienced challenges specific to family rejection and isolation pertaining to the identity of our young people. So if they come out as gay or they're trans or their family doesn't understand how they identify or what they're going through, maybe the young person doesn't understand, but the family has a negative response to their identity, and so that can raise all kinds of challenges which don't necessarily immediately appear as homophobic or transphobic, but they get crossed over. And so, the young people end up not feeling safe or happy at home and end up leaving, thinking they can find community elsewhere.

Rosie Mishael:

Transphobia, homophobia, biphobia discrimination, harassment, violence, and threats of violence, within the housing and shelter system can lead to unstable and unsafe living situations including couch surfing and sleeping on the streets. This is the case with Quill, a transgender man in his early twenties. Quill has experienced homelessness and housing instability since he was 17. He was living with his parents, but unfortunately they both died when he was young: his father when he was 12 and his mother when he was 17. After his mother's death, Quill left Toronto to live with his godmother in a small Ontario community. Quill described his godmother's place as a traumatic living environment where he experienced physical and emotional abuse. His godmother drank heavily and repeatedly called him a bad child. Shortly after moving in, Quill came out as a transgender man. His godmother told him he was confused and denied his identity, saying he was too feminine to be a man.

Rosie Mishaiel:

Quill ran away two weeks later because of the abuse and because, according to Quill, the small community was not a safe environment for someone who is transgender. After staying in a few shelters in neighbouring communities, a shelter staff member gave him a bus ticket back to Toronto. Quill was happy to move back because it was closer to where he grew up, his social network, and overall a more supportive environment. Quill spent his first night on the street because he had no means of contacting anyone. He stayed with a family friend for about a month before moving to a predominantly male rooming house that was within his budget. Despite being able to afford the rooming house, Quill quickly realized his landlord took issue with his trans identity.

Quill:

I already had suspicion that my landlady was not very good and was really religious, which I could tell, very clearly. And after a while it just progressively got worse, my roommates were never really home, and then one day just woke up and she was praying above my head. So I had told her to get out of the house and left the next day.

Rosie Mishaiel:

Quill's experience shines a light on the discrimination and harassment still faced by many LGBTQ2S+ people across the city. Clare from Egale says that what Quill and Renel have faced is all too common for gender and sexually diverse people. Noting that the single biggest barrier people face when trying to find stable housing is systemic discrimination and oppression.

Clare Nobbs:

Many of these situations can look on the surface really like the young people brought it upon themselves, but when you peel off the layers of the onion, you can see that the struggles start at a very different place. And it's often the way in many situations, but the work that we do within the LGBTQ or the 2SLGBTQI community is that the, again, referring back to this struggle with society around you, reinforcing that being

straight, that being cisgender is the norm, and is the standard against which we must measure everything, it's going to really weigh on a young person. So, if someone is living in poverty, if someone lives with racism every day of their lives, if they meet transphobic discrimination when they step on the street car, when they walk out of the door, when they go for a coffee, then they are going to be facing a lot of stress. Which researchers have called "minority stress," but it's a particular kind of stress that you face when you're experiencing oppression on a daily basis that kind of wears away at your nerves, and your ability to get by healthfully increases reactivity, increases the fight/flight mechanism in our brains, and we can get into situations of conflict on the street, conflict in shelters, conflict in the home.

Rosie Mishael:

Like many, Quill found himself having to rely on the shelter system. Quill says he tried to avoid the shelter system for as long as he could. He said that many of the staff were good at using his preferred name and pronouns, but a few staff refused.

Quill:

I was... there was no single rooms, no safety for transgender people. I can recall when, actually one of the first days I was there, I was sitting down eating breakfast and I ended up getting sick because of it, because it was bad food. And one of the kids walked up to me and said, "Are you a boy or are you a girl?" And then progressively continued to call me a "he/she," which led to me yelling at them to stop and leave me alone. Then I got in trouble by one of the staff members for apparently calling them a name that I hadn't called them, and they threatened that if they saw me on the street that they would do harm to me essentially, so.

Rosie Mishael:

Quill experienced violence, harassment and transphobia by clients and some of the staff. He was so concerned for his personal safety, he refused to leave the shelter unless he was accompanied. Homeless youth from the LGBTQ2S+ community are at a greater risk for substance use, risky sexual behaviour, and mental health issues, which are all made worse by a lack of specialized social and health supports. Quill's

homelessness and housing instability have had a significant impact on his life and health. Quill said he used alcohol and marijuana to cope with his traumatic experiences, and was always drunk and high while staying at the shelters. Although he eventually returned to school, he was failing most of his classes.

Quill:

I experienced a little bit of addiction in coping with what I was going through and what I had gone through, which was obviously really hard. It was really difficult with my mental health, in regards I couldn't find a doctor that would give me hormones until I was stable for a short period of time, which affected my mental health. There was a few cases. I gained and I lost a lot of weight, I got sick, so forth.

Rosie Mishael:

Clare at Egale strongly believes that increasing mental health support throughout the system will have a positive impact on housing outcomes.

Clare Nobbs:

It's really important not to just put them in housing, and in fact for many people facing struggles of all ages, you can't just put a person in housing if they still face those difficulties. Because then they're going to, again, get into difficulties with the landlord, or with roommates, with neighbours, and they're going to be evicted. So, what we try to do is find supports for them so that it's in tandem with the housing. There is this kind of package of supports for them around mental health, around job training, around skills building.

Rosie Mishael:

Quill also feels there needs to be more mental health supports and shelters, because so many shelter residents have had traumatic experiences. He thinks there needs to be more shelters specific for LGBTQ2S+ people. He also thinks that existing shelters should be made safer and more inclusive. Quill now lives with a roommate in private market rental. He posted an online ad for a place that was trans-friendly. He describes his current living situation as stable and positive. Unlike the past where he

was withdrawn and didn't seek out connection, Quill now says he feels comfortable enough to go out, able to see his friends more and his confidence has improved.

Quill:

It made my mental health so much better. I was able to become more independent, to be able to be confident in myself because there was no confidence whatsoever. I was very unconfident with myself and with everything, it was not a good experience. So, having somebody say, "You can't be on hormones because of where you're living," knowing that it would only benefit you afterwards, and I proved them wrong and they have said so, so.

Rosie Mishael:

Toronto is one of the most diverse cities in the world, however, some in the city experience greater hardship because of their differences. Quill and Renel's stories are examples of how the current system is not meeting the needs of our diverse population. Quill was fortunate to land in a home where he feels comfortable and secure. Others like Renel, aren't so lucky. Housing should be a key priority for all three levels of government: municipal, provincial and federal. To promote the health of Torontonians and reduce health inequities, new housing policies and program interventions are needed to increase the supply, the repair, and the maintenance of affordable, supportive, accessible, and permanent housing, where people can live free from discrimination. For information about supports and services related to housing, income, mental health, and other issues discussed in this series, please call 311. Next episode you'll meet John, a man in his sixties living with financial debt and mental health issues. He faces losing his childhood home and is having trouble coping with the strain.

John:

You try to push away those obstacles. You spend all your energy, whatever energy, whatever effort you have, doing that. And you have nothing left over. And that's why you see people have suicidal thoughts, it's because eventually we say, "It's too much and I don't see anything."



Rosie Mishaiel:

My name is Rosie Mishaiel, and this has been Toronto Public Health's podcast, Housing and Health: Unlocking Opportunity. Written by Toronto Public Health, and produced and edited by MediaFace. We thank all who contributed to this episode by sharing their stories. We also acknowledge The Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, as well as the Indigenous peoples on whose land these stories took place: the Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat.