



Preventing Homelessness Among TransLatinas in a Sanctuary City

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As a sanctuary city—a municipality with expanded non-discrimination laws and city-wide equity programs—San Francisco protects undocumented immigrants from deportation following low-level offenses, and is largely considered a safe haven for vulnerable populations. Yet, advocates have noted that the city's policies have failed to adequately protect and provide for some of the most at-risk residents: transgender people, and particularly transgender immigrants.

The estimated rate of homelessness among transgender people in San Francisco far exceeds that of the general population, with half of transgender people having experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. Critically, **our research** demonstrates that TransLatinas—transgender women of Latin American descent—are particularly at-risk of experiencing homelessness. Despite the evidence, housing and homelessness policy frequently **marginalizes the needs** of these communities. As anti-immigrant laws and policies endanger the safety of transgender and immigrant communities throughout the United States, it is imperative that city officials within this sanctuary city take concrete steps to address the crisis of homelessness among TransLatinas in San Francisco.

Causes and Impact of Housing Deprivation

Anti-trans discrimination, legal and language barriers, and costly and competitive rental markets can make safe housing nearly impossible for TransLatinas to obtain. On an interpersonal level, landlords frequently violate TransLatinas' legal rights; participants in our study described cases of landlords expecting sex in exchange for housing, and the cancellation of previously approved rental contracts when landlords discovered their tenants were transgender. TransLatinas also noted interpersonal discrimination in shelters, among both staff and other residents.

Language and legal barriers can present multiple obstacles to obtaining housing. Accessing public or subsidized housing is particularly onerous for trans people who are not primarily English speakers, are not citizens or permanent residents, or who have a criminal record, including those leaving ICE detention. Lack of legal immigration status can also compromise many TransLatinas' ability to contest landlords' illegal actions. As one participant said: "If someone doesn't have documents, they can tell you in any moment, leave... Not having documents means not having a voice."

The challenges of housing discrimination, coupled with legal barriers, means that TransLatinas are disproportionately pushed into informal economy jobs, including some of the most dangerous positions in the sex industry. In addition to being pushed into street-based sex work in order to pay rent, participants described trading sex for a place to stay and being coerced to have sex with landlords in order to secure housing. This compounding lack of housing options and lack of access to safe employment in the formal economy increases TransLatinas' exposure to the violence of police and carceral systems.

Threats to Mental and Physical Health

TransLatinas' mental and physical health are further threatened by past and ongoing exposure to violence, accumulating as trauma. This trauma, combined with ongoing labor market exclusion and housing instability

contributes to reported feelings of depression, anxiety, and hopelessness, and the ongoing threat of criminalization means TransLatinas have decreased access to safe supports.

Many study participants felt trapped in a cycle of dangerous informal economy work and housing precarity, and some used drugs as a response to the untreated trauma that results. Post-traumatic stress and substance use make it even more difficult to safely earn enough money to afford housing and thrive.

Recommendations

To eliminate homelessness and break the cycle of poverty among this particularly vulnerable population, we need to improve homeless service provision and expand safe housing.

- **Hire Spanish-speaking and transgender staff.** Homeless services that enforce transphobic gender norms and expectations make it impossible for transgender people to safely access services. Staff inability to communicate with monolingual Spanish-speakers is also a serious barrier for many unhoused and precariously housed TransLatinas.
- **Expand access to legal assistance.** TransLatinas experiencing housing instability need legal assistance to support asylum claims, and to secure legal documentation for housing and employment. In cases of discrimination, they also may need legal advice and advocacy.
- **Replace policing with a housing-first approach to care.** Any interventions that aim to address substance use or mental health among TransLatinas must begin with the provision of safe, gender-affirming and linguistically competent housing. Reallocation of resources currently used for policing to the provision of housing interrupts the violence of criminalization while simultaneously addressing several of TransLatinas' overlapping needs.

The ability to access stable, long-term housing would decrease TransLatinas' vulnerability to violence and sexual coercion, decrease their exposure to carceral systems, and allow them to flourish in the city they call home. With the adoption of these policy recommendations, San Francisco will be one step closer to living up to its claim as a sanctuary for all.

Read more in Dilara Yarbrough and Christoph Hanssmann, "**The Crisis of Transgender Homelessness**" in "*Stop the Revolving Door: A Street-level Framework for a New System*" (San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness, 2020). For more information on TransLatina advocacy, visit [El/La Para TransLatinas](#)