

In memory of 16 year-old Dwayne Jones who became homeless at age 12 and was murdered on July 22, 2013 in St. James.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) identity in Jamaica is shaped and coloured by displacement. Whether physically or mentally, displacement from family, community and sometimes country is a defining marker of the lived experiences of LGBT people.

Over the years, landlords, families, neighbours and/or other community members have forced many LGBT Jamaicans to leave their homes and communities. Between 2009 and 2012, LGBT persons made fifty-three (53) reports of displacement to J-FLAG. In 2012, there were twelve (12) reports, all involving males under 18 years. In 2013, there were eight (8) such reports and the organisation provided some form of housing assistance to fourteen persons.

Most persons who are forced to leave their homes and communities eventually find safe accommodation elsewhere. With the support of NGOs, relatives and friends, some even return to their homes and live on tenterhooks. Fearing continued harassment and violence, others leave Jamaica to seek refuge in countries such as Canada, England, the Netherlands and the USA. However, a significant number are forced to live and work on the street. This is especially common among those from the lowest socio-economic stratum.

Homelessness among the LGBT community has become increasingly visible. Many of those who become homeless seek refuge on the streets of New Kingston, one of the capital’s primary business districts. This continues to generate media attention both locally and internationally. Displaced LGBT people have also sought refuge in abandoned homes and buildings.

The National Committee on Homelessness-Jamaica\(^1\), which was established under the Board of Supervision (for the Relief of the Poor in Jamaica) reports that there are over 1000 homeless Jamaicans. The Committee notes, “homelessness is everyone’s business”. However, this is generally not reflected in the institutional response to appeals for assistance, nor in the attitudes and behaviours of the average Jamaican towards the homeless.

An individual is considered homeless if he or she resides "in places not meant for human habitation - cars, parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings and on the street" (National Committee for the Homeless Report, 2012). \(^1\) This also includes individuals in transitional houses such as infirmaries and shelters.

This brief is intended to guide policy and programmatic discussions regarding homelessness among LGBT people in Jamaica. It highlights the crucial role of the Government of Jamaica in ensuring that homeless and displaced LGBT persons have access to the necessary social safety nets. This brief recommends that the Ministry of Local Government and Community Development address this issue in the proposed Homeless Policy, which should be inclusive and non-discriminatory.

In addition to providing shelter, the government should also introduce developmental programmes for psychosocial rehabilitation and civic rights and responsibilities training. These initiatives will help displaced LGBT people reintegrate into society. Ultimately, the provision of more shelters, transitional housing and social safety nets should cater to all homeless citizens, while ensuring that they are LGBT-friendly.

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\(^1\) The National Homeless Committee examines the circumstance of Homelessness throughout Jamaica. It also will plan, organise and develop programmes, projects and regulations, and make recommendations for their implementations of providing housing accommodation, funding programmes and projects, coordinating services, raising awareness among stakeholders and the public and improving the care and protection of the homeless.
Overview: Homelessness in Jamaica

Homelessness has been a chronic problem in Jamaica since Hurricane Gilbert in 1988. The National Committee on Homelessness marks the aftermath of this hurricane as one of the main events that led to the development of deep-seated homelessness in Jamaica (National Committee on Homelessness, Report 2012). According to this report there are at least 1,160 persons who are homeless island-wide. The majority—a total of 616 persons—reside in the parishes of Kingston and St. Andrew. St. James - the second city and one of the major tourist areas - has a total of 138 homeless people (see Figure 1).

Included in this statistic are LGBT persons who are homeless. Though LGBT individuals might have been included in this survey, it did not directly measure homelessness among LGBT people. As a result, this brief could not measure the extent of homelessness in the LGBT community.

Limitation of Data

There is an urgent need to collect comprehensive data on homelessness in Jamaica. The information provided above (in Figure 1) only contains incidents of homelessness known to the Poor Relief Department. Furthermore, there are numerous homeless persons who do not interact with the Poor Relief Department or its affiliated agencies. As a result, data from the Poor Relief Department do not provide an accurate or comprehensive report on homelessness in Jamaica.

Based on reports from J-FLAG, between thirty (30) and sixty (60) LGBT homeless persons frequent the New Kingston area. There are additional communities of LGBT persons known to be homeless in Kingston & St Andrew and St James.

If accurate information is not provided on homelessness in Jamaica, future policies and programmes geared towards assisting the homeless might be inadequate or misdirected. This brief recommends that a population survey be conducted in Jamaica to ascertain the number of homeless persons, as well as those who live and work on the streets and in temporary places of shelter. In addition, it is important that this population survey accounts for those who are socially displaced as a result of their sexual orientation and gender non-conforming expression.

Contextualizing Homelessness: LGBT Persons

People become homeless for a variety of reasons. These include, but are not limited to crime and violence, health status (including HIV, AIDS, or mental illness), family problems, eviction, drug use, poverty, and unemployment (National Committee on Homelessness, 2012).

Reports made to J-FLAG indicate that homelessness among LGBT persons is almost always the result of discrimination or violence. This is largely based on negative beliefs about the sexual orientation of LGBT persons. An antiquated “buggery law” as well as a deep-rooted culture of heteronormativity and homo-negativity among many Jamaicans fuel this discrimination. As a consequence, LGBT people such as Dwayne Jones have been forced to leave their homes and communities, families, friends, and loved ones and seek refuge on the streets. With the support of organisations such as J-FLAG, as well as
relatives and friends, some homeless LGBT persons eventually find safe accommodation elsewhere or return to their homes. Others leave Jamaica to seek asylum abroad. However, some are forced to remain on the streets or find shelter in abandoned or unused buildings.

Displacement among the LGBT community is increasingly common as a result of discrimination. For example, one young man tried to return to his community in Maxfield Avenue after being ostracized but was chased by an angry mob that forced him to leave the community\(i\). Incidents such as this have resulted in a number of LGBT people being displaced and made homeless in Kingston & St. Andrew and other parishes.

The issue of homelessness among LGBT persons is often regarded as a ‘gay issue’ or a sexual identity issue occurring in isolation, and not within the broader national context. The disproportionate visibility of LGBT persons who are homeless encourages this perception. Numerous complaints have reflected disgust at homeless persons who are open about their sexuality and gender identity. LGBT persons who are homeless have been characterised as ‘uncontrollable’, ‘vulgar’, ‘wreaking havoc’, and a menace to society. In particular property and business owners claim that their presence results in a devaluation of property and a decline in business activity.

**What is Being Done by Stakeholders**

People who are homeless are generally cared for through programmes from civil society organisations, including faith-based organisations and by local government. However, the services provided may be insufficient relative to the total number of homeless persons known by the Poor Relief Department.

The National Homeless Report (2012) indicates that of the 1,160 homeless persons reported by the Poor Relief Department, over 400 do not receive any form of care from government, private sector and/or NGOs (see Figure 2).
J-FLAG is therefore urging the government to implement an inclusive, non-discriminatory programme for all persons who are homeless including LGBT. J-FLAG has tried numerous interventions to assist displaced members of the LGBT community. These include helping to reintegrate homeless persons into their families and communities, assisting with temporary shelter and providing other psychosocial services. However, J-FLAG has limited capacity to provide for the number of displaced within the community. JASL has also provided extensive services to homeless LGBT persons. An NCDA programme entitled ‘Tek it to Dem’ has provided services in the form of HIV and AIDS treatment for homeless persons, including LGBT people.

**Recent Commitment for Homeless LGBT**

In a newspaper article published June 13, 2014, Member of Parliament for South East St. Andrew and State Minister in the Ministry of Science, Technology, Energy and Mining, Hon. Julian Robinson said there was a need to help homeless gays in his constituency as they have gained national and international attention.

The Government of Jamaica has increased its budgetary support for homeless programmes for all local authorities from $16 million to $21 million. This increase in funding could be used to implement programmes targeted at homeless LGBT people, as this is a matter of urgency. J-FLAG implores Minister Julian Robinson and local authorities to use this funding to develop programmes that will address this issue in his constituency, where a large number of homeless LGBT persons have taken refuge.

**J-FLAG recommends that**

1. Research be conducted to ascertain the homeless population in Jamaica.
2. A Drop-in Centre be established for persons who are homeless. This would provide rehabilitation, personal hygiene care, food and access to healthcare services.
3. A Night Shelter should be created. This would provide a place to sleep at night and shelter in times of natural disasters such as a hurricane.
4. Housing in the form of a shelter for persons who are homeless be created; this would provide individuals with a place to reside.
5. The Government develops a non-discriminatory policy for the management of all forms of shelter provided by the State.
6. The government introduce developmental programmes for psychosocial rehabilitation and civic rights and responsibilities training for persons who are homeless.

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J-FLAG is the foremost organisation in Jamaica advocating for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, in an effort to build a Jamaican society that respects and protects the rights of everyone.

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