

## Young, Queer, & Homeless in Toronto

By Christine Wong-Chong, M.A.

Homelessness affects different segments of Toronto's street youth population in distinct ways. Youth who self-identify as "Queer"—a political term used to describe individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgendered, two-spirited, or inter-sexed—are overrepresented among the street youth population in comparison to their numbers in the general population. For example, in 2004 CBC's *The Fifth Estate* reported that street youth are much more likely to be queer (20-40%) than the general population (10%) (CBC News, *The Fifth Estate*, 2004). Another recent study on homeless and street-involved youth found that in Toronto 29.6% of street youth identified as "non-straight" and 2.7% as transgendered (Gaetz, 2004, p.433). In the United States, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute's report on *The Epidemic of Homelessness* experienced by queer youth, also found that sexual minorities are disproportionately represented among the homeless (Ray, 2006). This overrepresentation was similarly observed in our research. In our sample of 150 street-involved youth (75 males and 75 females aged 16-20) we found that 47 identified as other than heterosexual or straight, with 26.7% of males and 36% of females reporting a sexual orientation that fell under the umbrella term "queer".

*Why did you leave home when you did?*

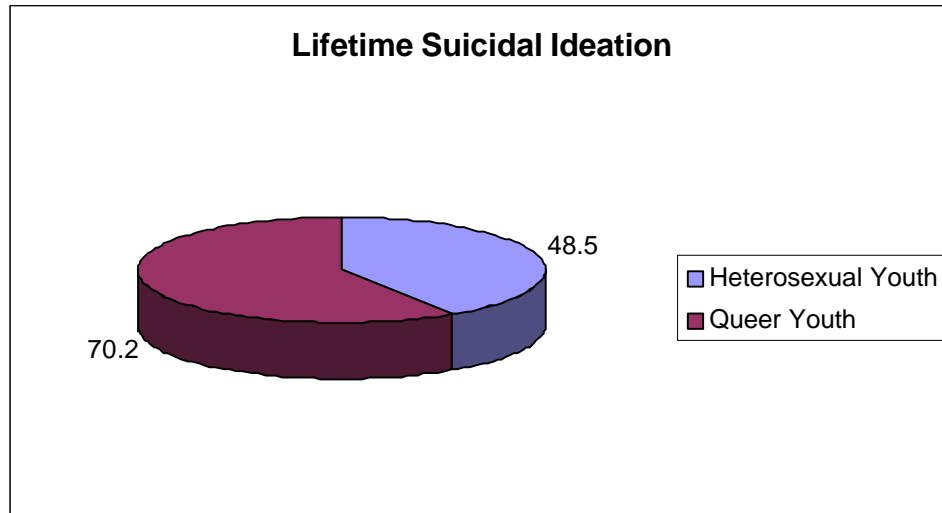
[Because] They don't [accept that] I'm gay. I couldn't express myself.

- *Filipino Male, age 19*

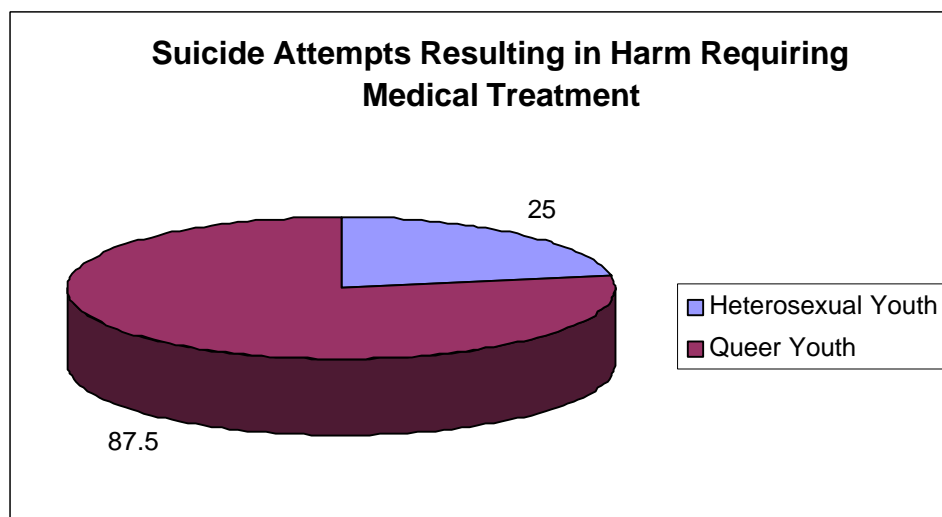
Queer youth are overrepresented in the street population for a number of reasons. One of the main reasons lies in the familial struggle over accepting or coming to terms with the youth's sexual orientation. Conflicts at home, which often involve instances of abuse and neglect, are still the primary causes of homelessness among the majority of street youth (both queer and straight), but can be experienced more intensely by those who are queer. For instance, many queer youth end up on the streets after being kicked out of their homes for revealing their sexuality to unsupportive family members. Others choose the streets over their homes simply because life on the street (especially in large urban centers like Toronto) may provide them with a sense of acceptance and support that is missing in their home and community environments (Kruks, 1991, p.516). Thus, homophobia, discrimination, and prejudice also play a central role in queer overrepresentation on the streets (Kruks, 1991, p.516).

The challenge of surviving on the streets coupled with the stigma of being “queer” amplifies the extent of the problems faced by these youth when compared to their heterosexual counterparts. This was reflected in our research based on interviews with 75 male and 75 female street-involved youth aged 16-20 years. These are some of the key findings:

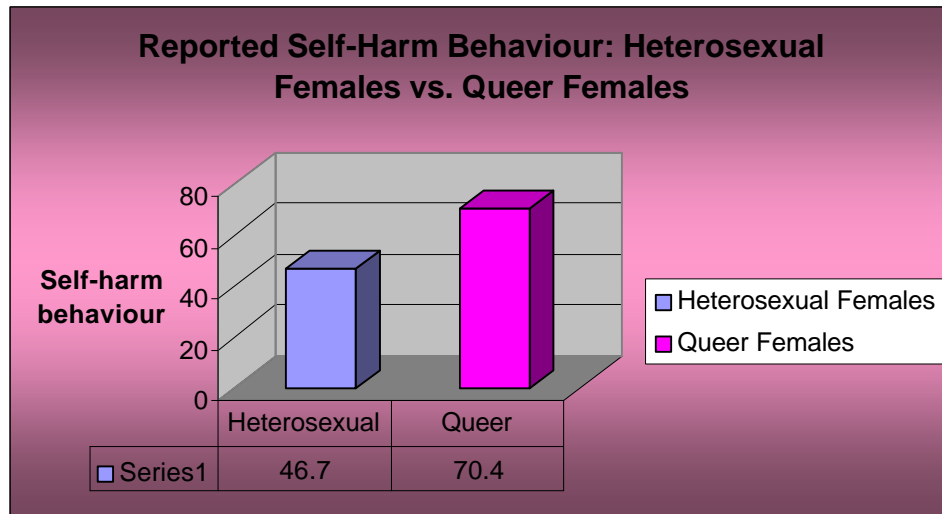
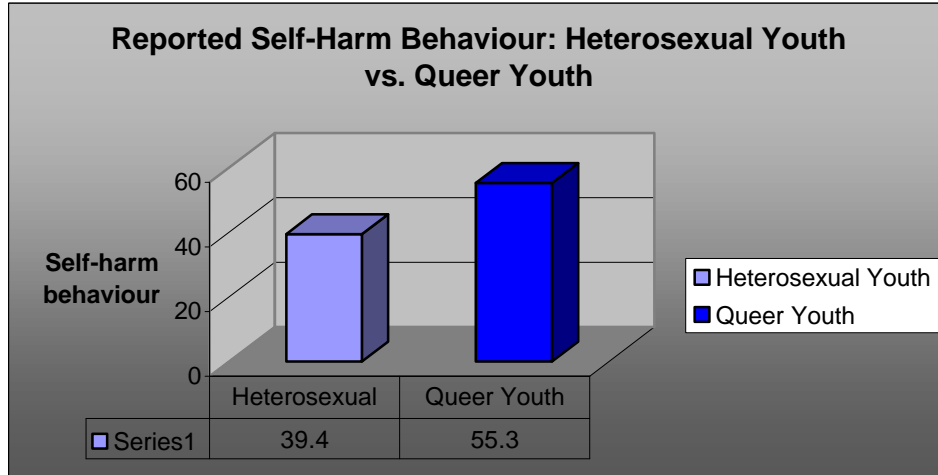
- **Thoughts of suicide:** Queer street youth were found to be at an increased risk of contemplating suicide over their life-course compared to their heterosexual peers (70.2% vs. 48.5% respectively).



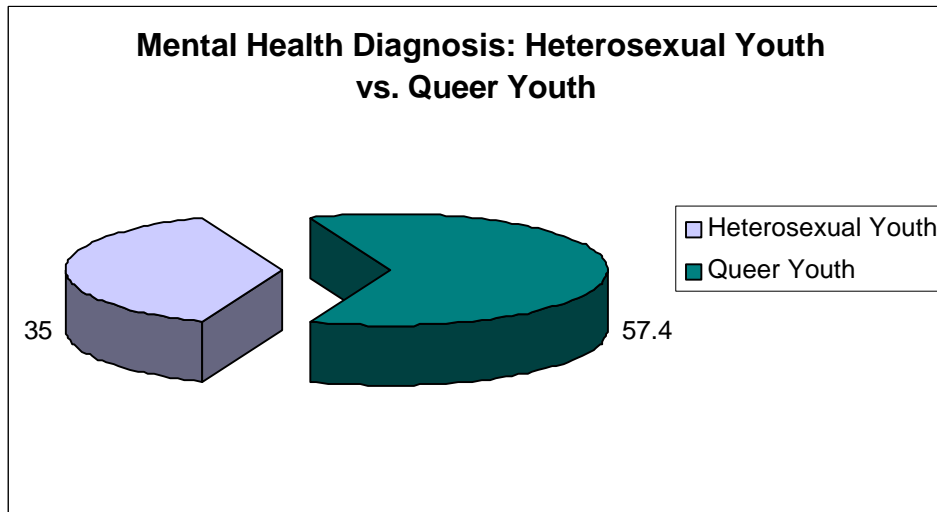
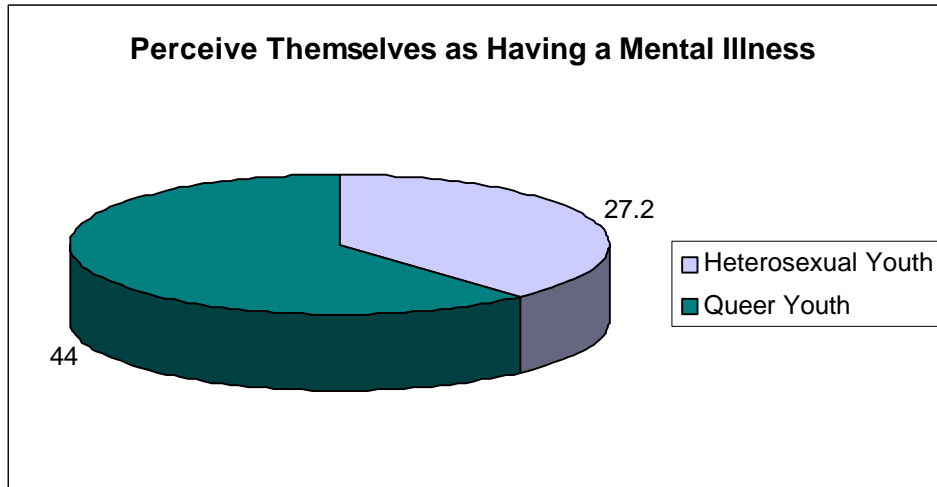
- **Suicide attempts:** Homeless sexual minority youth were also more likely to report a suicide attempt in the past 12 months that resulted in harm (such as an injury, poisoning, or overdose) requiring medical treatment (87.5% vs. 25.0% respectively).



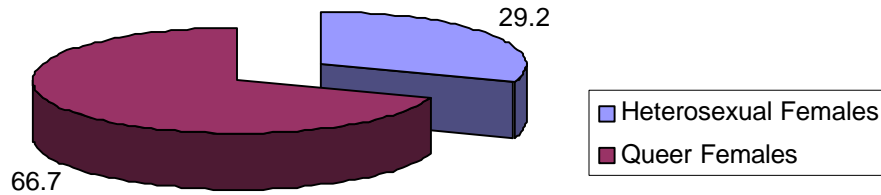
- Self-harm:** Queer street youth were more likely to report self-harm behaviour than heterosexual street youth (55.3% vs. 39.4% respectively) and queer females (70.4%) were significantly more likely to report such behaviour when compared to heterosexual females (46.7%)



- **Mental health problems:** Significantly more homeless sexual minority youth than heterosexual street youth perceive themselves as having a mental illness (44% vs. 27.2% respectively) and they are more likely than heterosexual street youth to have received a mental health diagnosis (57.4% vs. 35.0% respectively), with queer females being more likely to report such a diagnosis than heterosexual females (66.7% vs. 29.2% respectively)

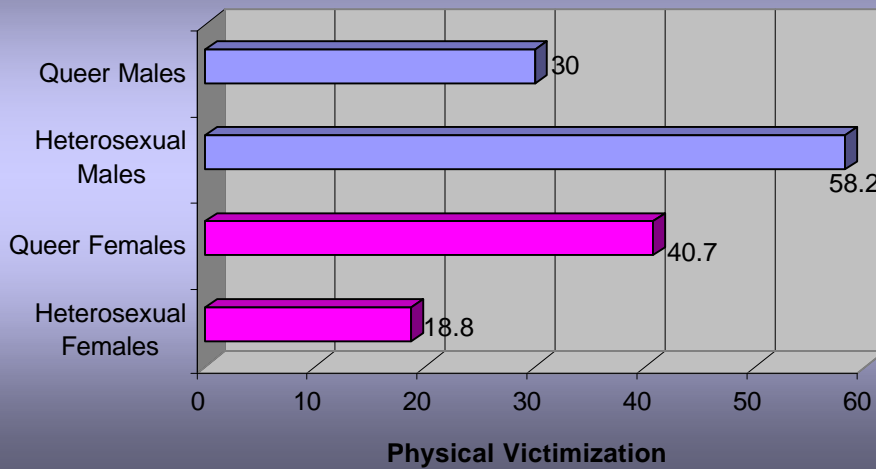


### Mental Health Diagnosis: Heterosexual Females vs. Queer Females

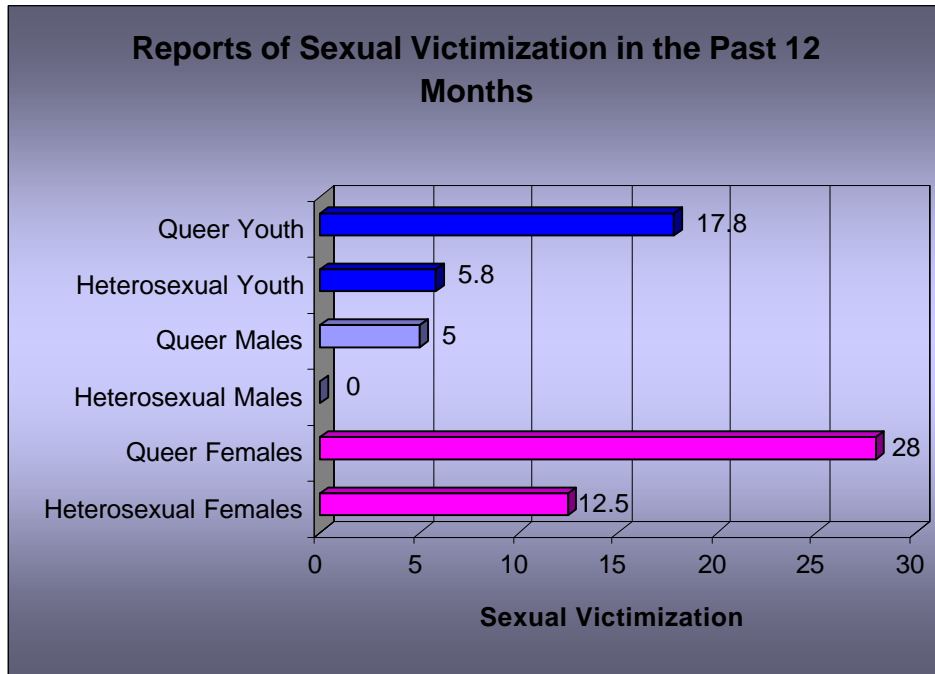


- **Physical victimization:** When asked whether they had been physically assaulted in the past 12 months, sexual minority females were more likely to report such victimization (40.7%) compared to heterosexual females (18.8%), whereas queer men reported less physical victimization (30.0%) in comparison to heterosexual males (58.2%)

### Reports of Physical Victimization in the Past 12 Months

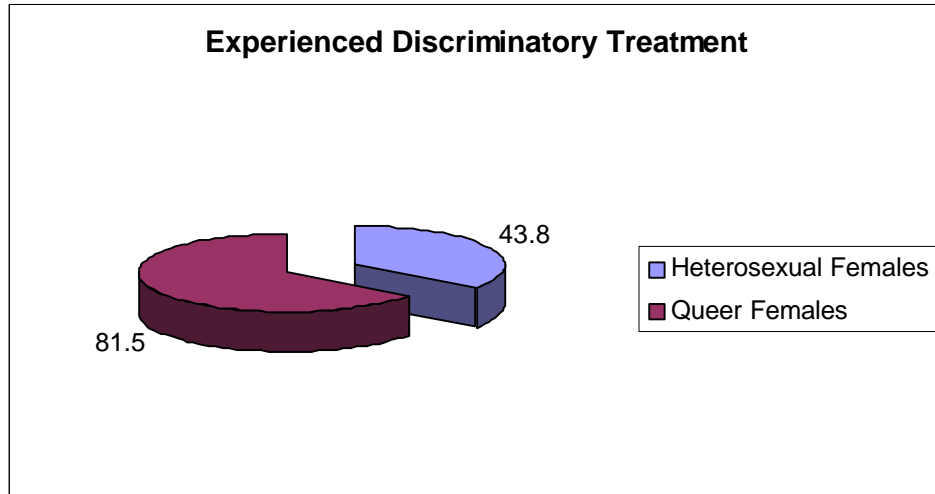


- **Sexual victimization:** When asked whether they had been sexually assaulted in the past 12 months, we found that queer youth were more likely to report such an incident, compared to their heterosexual peers (17.8% vs. 5.8% respectively). Both queer males and females reported a victimization rate that was higher than that reported by their heterosexual same-sex counterparts. For instance, the sexual victimization rate was 28.0% for queer females vs. 12.5% for heterosexual females. For men the figures were 5.0% for queer males vs. 0.0% for heterosexual males.



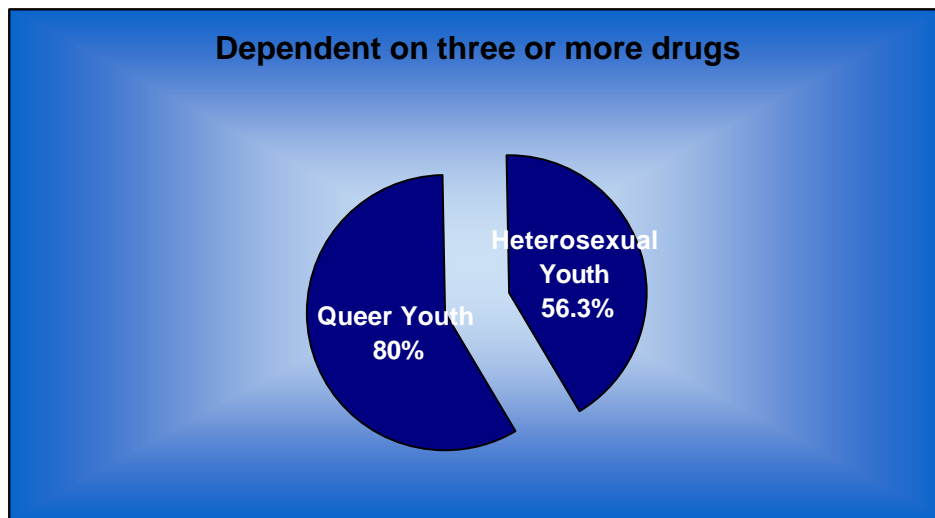
Note: Statistics reported for sexual victimization of queer males vs. heterosexual males and queer females vs. heterosexual females are significant at the 90% confidence level.

- **Discrimination:** When asked if they have ever been unfairly stopped, searched, questioned, physically threatened or abused by the police, we found that sexual minority females were significantly more likely to report any discriminatory treatment (81.5%) in comparison to heterosexual females (43.8%)



- **Substance use:** For nearly all substances examined in our study (which includes cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, hallucinogens, amphetamines, cocaine, crack, heroin, and crystal meth), sexual minority youth were found to have higher user rates as well as greater rates of dependency when compared to heterosexual youth. Below are some of the findings that highlight their greater vulnerability to substance abuse problems:
  - 23.9% of queer youth reported having used amphetamines once or twice per week or more in the last 12 months, whereas only 8.7% of heterosexual youth claimed to have done so. When we compared queer females with heterosexual females, we found that 25.9% of queer females reported using amphetamines once or twice per week or more during the last 12 months, while 0% of heterosexual females reported such usage
  - Similar figures were found for powder cocaine use in the last 12 months, with 23.9% of queer youth reporting that they had used the substance once or twice per week or more during this period, compared to 12.6% of heterosexual youth
  - 10.9% of queer youth reported using heroin once or twice per week or more in the last 12 months compared to only 1.0% of heterosexual youth. Queer females were more likely to report such usage when compared to straight females (18.5% vs. 2.1% respectively).
  - When asked whether they felt that they needed or were dependent on the substances of interest in our study, queer youth were found to have higher dependency rates on more substances than heterosexual youth. For instance, when asked whether they were dependent on three or

more drugs, we found 56.3% of heterosexual youth and 80% of queer youth reporting such dependence.



### Policy Recommendations

*Rejection by peers, teachers, and parents (or even the fear of rejection) is often internalized as self-hatred and externalized as self-destructive behaviour*  
(van Wormer & McKinney, 2003)

Compared to their heterosexual peers, queer youth are more vulnerable to having lifetime suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and mental health and substance abuse problems. They are also more likely to engage in self-harm behaviour and are more susceptible to discrimination and both physical and sexual victimization than heterosexual youth. Reducing or eliminating the stigmatization of queer youth in education, social services, employment, and housing will diminish the magnitude of these problems and in doing so, minimize both the physical and emotional harms experienced by queer homeless youth.

In order to ease the burdens currently endured by queer homeless youth, it is necessary not only to react to the problems experienced by these youth, but also to prevent them from developing in the first place. The following are both proactive and reactive policy recommendations. We put them forward as targets that may help to mend the current queer "epidemic of homelessness" (Ray, 2006).

- Ensure that teachers, health, and social service professionals undergo LGBT awareness training so that they may be better able to understand the distinct issues faced by this special population
- Have more shelters and transitional housing options that are dedicated to serving the needs of LGBT youth
- Make shelters that serve street youth a positive space for LGBT homeless youth as well



- Provide information to parents and/or guardians of queer teens that will enable them to comprehend and develop a greater sensitivity to what their son or daughter is going through and to correct common misconceptions of queer sexuality
  - For example, the book by Kevin Jennings and Pat Shapiro *Always My Child: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Your Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered or Questioning Son or Daughter*
- Conduct more research in terms of finding out what happens to queer youth when they are placed with foster families –are they similarly rejected and neglected by the foster care system as they were by their biological family? For example, is the foster care system better or worse at meeting their special emotional needs?
- Eliminate discrimination (and the corresponding pains and destructive coping mechanisms that accompany it) from the school setting:
  - Starting at the elementary school level, schools should teach students how to respect the different racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual orientations of their classmates
  - Encourage queer educators to become involved in providing guidance and mentorship to LGBT youth
  - Have social workers and counselors trained in LGBT awareness present at school to offer guidance and support to queer teens
  - Effectively prohibit discrimination and harassment of students based on their sexual orientation and discipline those who fail to respect such rules
  - Make information regarding LGBT issues (such as books, websites, and magazines) accessible to youth, teachers, school counselors, and administrators in school libraries
- Have employers uphold the law as stated in the *Ontario Human Rights Code* that forbids all forms of discrimination and harassment on the basis of one's sexual orientation from the workplace
- Provide youth with information on where and how they can access treatment for their drug use and/or mental health problems (e.g. needle exchange programs and mental health services)
- Communicate information regarding the negative aspects of using drugs as a means of reducing the harms experienced by this special population
- Empower youth to make informed decisions concerning their health and well-being

***Suggested Citation:***

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