

Literature Review & Environmental Scan:

Journeys into and Out of Homelessness and Housing Precarity for Youth in Canada

Despite decades of research and advocacy across Canada, youth homelessness remains a persistent and increasingly prevalent problem in most Canadian communities. These trends are concerning given the enormous harm experienced by youth on the streets, including sexual exploitation, health and mental health challenges, criminal victimization, isolation, and nutritional vulnerability (Gaetz et al., 2016). Societal responses have been primarily emergency-focused (e.g., shelters, drop-ins), largely failing to focus on prevention and quick transitions out of homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2018). In order to more effectively respond to youth homelessness, we need to better understand the intersecting pathways into homelessness for young people, and the pathways that lead youth into safe, stable, adequate, and appropriate housing. We also need to understand how young people's migration between communities affects pathways into and out of homelessness. This literature review and environmental scan briefly outlines the current knowledge base on pathways into and out of homelessness for young people, highlighting promising practices and policies domestically and internationally.

Youth Homelessness in Canada: What do we know?

In Canada, approximately 35,000-40,000 youth experience homelessness each year, and research indicates growing rates of youth homelessness in many Canadian cities (Gaetz et al., 2016). Homelessness refers to a continuum of conditions, ranging from staying with friends (couch surfing), living in a shelter, to sleeping outdoors or in abandoned buildings. Youth homelessness represents young people, age 13 to 24, who are “living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe, or consistent residence” (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016).

The causes and conditions of homelessness are unique for young people. Young people are typically economically and socially dependent on adults, and are undergoing significant physical, cognitive, and emotional development while navigating the streets (Nichols et al., 2017). Further, many youth have not yet developed the personal, social, and life skills needed to navigate independent life, and often face considerable challenges finding well-paying employment and affordable housing (Thulien, 2017; Schwan et al., 2018a). These challenges are experienced intersectionally – that is, different populations experiencing homelessness, housing precarity and its social contexts differently – with Indigenous, newcomer, LGBTQ2S+ youth, and young women experiencing additional barriers and challenges (Gaetz et al., 2016). These findings demonstrate the need for youth-specific approaches to homelessness that account for youth's diverse social locations.

The largest pan-Canadian study on youth homelessness demonstrates the profound harm caused by homelessness, including extraordinary mental health challenges (42% report at least one suicide attempt), disengagement with school and employment, criminal victimization (including sexual violence and sex trafficking), and nutritional vulnerability (Gaetz et al., 2016). Significantly, a majority of youth experiencing homelessness in Canada have had more than one experience (75.9%) of violence, and more than a third have had over five experiences (36.9%) of violence (Gaetz et al., 2016). Both international and domestic scholars point to the structural and system-based causes of youth homelessness, indicating that youth homelessness represents a human rights failure on behalf of Canadian society (Canada Without Poverty, 2016). As such, there is an urgent need to better understand what policies, practices, and interventions effectively prevent and end homelessness for young people in Canada.

Rural Youth Homelessness and Migration into Urban Centres

Young people face diverse challenges to accessing housing depending on the community they live in. Research suggests that youth's experiences differ significantly across rural, remote, and urban communities. While research has primarily focused on youth homelessness in urban Canadian centres, studies indicate that youth homelessness remains a critical problem in rural communities (Cloke, 2002; Kauppi et al., 2017). Indigenous youth in rural and remote communities particularly face extraordinary challenges to housing stability (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Despite the intersecting challenges that youth in rural communities face, there is limited research on the prevalence of rural youth homelessness and the needs of these youth (Lukawiecki et al., 2018). Available research suggests that youth experiencing homelessness in rural communities experience unique challenges, including:

- Fewer housing options
- Barriers to transportation
- Fewer opportunities for employment
- Fewer services, including youth-specific services (Edwards et al., 2009; Gaetz, 2013); and
- High rates of family substance use and family violence, both of which can contribute to a risk of homelessness (Kauppi et al., 2017).

Lukawiecki and colleagues (2018) conclude:

“While several approaches for prevention, support, and responses to youth homelessness exist, these are typically developed and implemented in the context of homelessness in urban areas. There is less understanding of how to address youth homelessness and develop prevention strategies in ways that are specific to the needs and priorities of youth living in rural communities” (p.1).

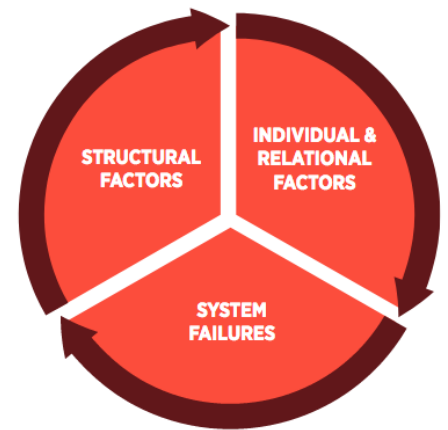
Complicating the picture of rural youth homelessness is evidence that youth experiencing housing precarity or homelessness may leave rural communities in search of services, in some cases severing important relationships and support systems (Turner, 2014; Woolley, 2016). Further research is needed on how these migration patterns, and resultant fractured

social networks, impact the efficacy of youth homelessness prevention programs (e.g., Family and Natural Supports programs) and housing stabilization efforts.

Pathways into Homelessness and Housing Precarity

For many young people, the causes of homelessness are multiple and intersectional, with the pathway into homelessness rarely linear. Scholarship on youth homelessness has consistently used a social-ecological model to explain the causes of homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2013), highlighting how structural factors, systems failures, and individual/relational dimensions contribute to a risk or experience of homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2018; Schwan et al., 2018a). As Gaetz and colleagues (2018) explain,

“At a population and community level, structural factors and systems failures can put youth and their families at risk of homelessness by shaping the opportunities available to them, and the barriers they encounter. Individual and relational factors (e.g., health challenges, intimate partner violence, brain injuries) have profound effects on young people’s lives, the challenges they face, their well-being, and their responses to adversity, which in some cases contribute to an increased risk of homelessness” (p. 13).



CAUSES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Using this ecological model helps us understand why some young people enter homelessness, while others do not.

Research on the causes and predictors of homelessness for youth is well established. Studies consistently identify the multiple, complex, and intersecting factors that contribute to youth homelessness, with these factors often working to amplify the effects of others (Koeller, 2008; Wingert et al., 2005). Karabanow explains, “The literature has provided an impressive grasp on the causes and consequences of street life, including family dysfunction, abuse and trauma, exploitation and alienation, poverty, addiction, and mental health and child welfare inadequacies...” (2009, p.1). [The National Youth Homelessness Survey](#) (2016), the largest study on youth homelessness conducted in Canada, found four key findings that help explain how youth become homeless:

1. Early Experiences of Homelessness and Housing Precarity – Many young people experience both adversity and housing precarity before they were entitled to access interventions and supports. Among youth experiencing homelessness across Canada, 40.1% were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness.

2. Housing Instability – The report found that “Youth reported a high degree of housing instability prior to their current experience of homelessness. In fact, only 24.1% reported they had been homeless once, meaning that 75.9% had experienced multiple episodes” (p. 8).

3. *Experiences of Childhood Trauma and Abuse & Involvement in Child Protection* – A high percentage (63.1%) of youth experienced childhood trauma and abuse, with 51.1% reporting physical abuse, 24% reporting sexual abuse, and 47.5% having experienced other forms of violence. Given this, it is unsurprising that 57.8% of youth had some kind of child welfare involvement over the course of their lives. In some cases, this involvement contributed to a risk of homelessness or was a pathway into homelessness.

4. *Challenges in School* – Data indicated “homeless youth have challenging and disrupted academic trajectories, with bullying and learning disabilities impacting school engagement and achievement for these youth. Among study participants, 50% reported being tested for a learning disability while at school, indicating that school staff view these youth as suffering in some way. Importantly, those who had dropped out of school were much more likely to report learning disabilities (41.8%), ADHD (46.1%), and physical disabilities (47.9%). Strikingly, 83% of youth reported that they had experienced bullying at school either ‘sometimes’ (37%) or ‘often’ (46%). This means that homeless youth are approximately four times more likely to have experienced bullying than Canadian youth in general” (p. 10).

Preventing Entry into Homelessness

A recent [International Review of Evidence](#) on youth homelessness prevention (Schwan et al., 2018) provided a review of practices and policies that have shown promise for preventing youth’s entry into homelessness. These range significantly between more ‘upstream approaches’ (e.g., addressing income inequality) and those that are focused on intervening when a youth is imminently at risk, or has entered into homelessness. Unsurprisingly, the evidence varies quite considerably across these, with some interventions boasting more evidence in comparison to others.

Evidence supports the following interventions to prevent entry into homelessness, at the individual/relational, system, and population level, organized according to Gaetz and DeJ’s (2017) [Prevention Typology](#):

Structural Prevention:

- Poverty reduction, including through increased benefit programs for families with children (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017).
- Increased availability of affordable housing, including through targeted housing subsidies for families (Culhane et al., 2011; Quigley & Raphael, 2002).
- Homelessness prevention policies and legislation. Examples of international legislation that aims to prevent homelessness includes: the Housing (Wales) Act (2014); England’s Homelessness Reduction Act (2017); Ireland’s National Homeless Prevention Strategy (2002); and Washington State’s Homeless Youth Prevention and Protection Act (2015).

Systems Prevention:

- Improved legal supports, including for youth in care (Pecora et al., 2017) and youth who have been victims of crime (Britton & Pilnik, 2018)

- Diversion from imprisonment for young people, including by removing or reducing mandatory sentencing policies (Webster & Doob, 2015)
- Interventions that reduce the loss of independent living through planning and services when youth are placed in detention (Brown et al., 2007)
- Supports to achieve housing stability following exits from public systems, including though facilitating reconnection and reunification with family and community (Fowler et al., 2017; Mares & Jordan, 2012)
- Preventing re-entry into the criminal justice system through fostering supportive social networks (Spencer & Jones-Walker, 2004; Todis et al., 2001) and educational and employment supports (Menon et al., 1995).

Early Intervention:

- School-based, family-centred interventions which foster partnerships between schools, social services, and other community resources (MacKenzie, 2018; Poppe & Gale, 2018)
- Respite housing (e.g., host homes), which provides short-term housing and supports for young people who have left home (Insley, 2011).

Eviction Prevention:

- Financial supports (e.g., rental assistance, rent supplements, housing subsidies) to prevent eviction into homelessness (Dasinger & Speigman, 2007; Evans, Sullivan, & Wallskog, 2016).
- Legal advice and representation in the event of an eviction (Gunn, 1995; Seron et al., 2001)
- Comprehensive financial, housing, health, mediation, and case management supports for families at risk of eviction (Goodman, Messeri, & O’Flaherty’s, 2016; Hill et al., 2002; Rolston et al., 2013).

Pathways Out of Homelessness and Housing Precarity

An emerging body of research seeks to understand what factors promote housing retention and wellness following youth’s exits from homelessness (Kidd et al., 2018; Karabanow, 2008; 2018; Roy, 2011; Thulien, 2018). Against all odds, some homeless youth are able to exit homelessness and transition into housing. While research on this group is scarce, it is critical for understanding “what works” in supporting youth to exit the streets and remain housed.

Challenges to Exiting Homelessness

The transition out of homelessness for youth is rarely linear (Karabanow, 2008) and often involves cycling in and out of homelessness and precarious housing (Gaetz et al., 2016b). While the evidence base concerning transitions from homelessness is limited, the results demonstrate that housing stability does not necessarily predict social inclusion, health, wellbeing, or labour participation (Thulien et al., 2018; Kidd, 2016). Once housed, many youth’s housing stability and wellness continues to be undermined by mental health

challenges, compounded trauma, lack of social support, and extreme poverty (Bruekner et al., 2011; Kidd et al., 2011; Thulien et al., 2018). Karabanow et al.'s (2018) *Homeless Youth and the Search for Stability*, a longitudinal study following 51 young people transitioning from homelessness in Toronto and Halifax, revealed the continual presence of structural barriers and limited social networks for youth. This resulted in social isolation, difficulties maintaining housing, and feelings of hopelessness and loneliness in youth. Thulien and colleagues' (2017) work on exits from homelessness similarly revealed that young people often lack opportunities to extend their social networks or formulate long-range plans, frequently experiencing ongoing social and economic marginalization, feelings of "outsiderness" and fears of becoming homeless again.

Research indicates that the structural and system-based challenges young people face is compounded by young people's developmental age and their stage of life (Gaetz et al., 2013; Kidd et al., 2016). In many cases young people face the responsibilities of adulthood without the accumulated experiences, supports, skills, or psychosocial resources that generally support this transition (Crane et al., 2014; Hagan & McCarthy, 2005).

Studies also indicate that transitions out of homelessness often requires shifts in young people's sense of identity and relationships to others, as well as changes to their worldviews and spiritual beliefs (Karabanow, 2018). For instance, emerging scholarship indicates that identity is a key determinant of social integration for young people exiting homelessness, informing youths' sense of self as included in the social world (Thulien, 2017). Existing research, meanwhile, identifies the critical importance of social inclusion – and, conversely, the negative impacts of exclusion and loneliness – upon socially marginalized populations (Meyer, 2003; Cameron, 2006), homeless individuals (Neale & Brown, 2016; Rew, 2000), and particularly youth (Kidd & Liborio, 2011; Perron et al., 2014). Kidd and Liborio (2011)'s research, for example, shows that the experience of exclusion and 'otherness' is pervasive and damaging to homeless youth. Likewise, Perron and colleagues (2014) identify that loneliness has particular impacts on homeless youth, and ought to be understood separately from other components of psychological distress (e.g., feeling trapped, hopelessness, giving up, helplessness).

Facilitators of Exits from Homelessness

While the evidence base is small, research suggests that housing stability is supported by: the provision of safe, affordable, and appropriate housing; income supports; and interventions that foster youth's assets, skills, networks, and health (Schwan et al., 2018b). Research consistently demonstrates that the most important factor in exiting homelessness is gaining access to safe, appropriate, and affordable housing (Kidd et al., 2016). In the absence of such housing, studies show that young people often cycle back into homelessness, often coming into contact with the criminal justice system or health and mental healthcare systems (Vitopoulos et al, 2017). Among research that demonstrates positive predictive factors for housing stability, Roy and colleagues (2011) also found that high school completion, employment, and mental health supports significantly improved housing stability. Other research aligns with these findings, identifying that social and mental health supports provided concurrently with housing for

young people exiting homelessness is more effective than housing alone (Lako et al., 2013; Krotofil et al., 2018; McPherson et al., 2018).

Promising Practices

- The efficacy of Housing First for stabilizing housing for adults experiencing homelessness has been well established, making it a ‘best practice’ (Goering & Streiner, 2015). Housing First has been adapted for young people who are homeless (Cheng et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2017; Goering & Streiner, 2015; Holtschneider, 2016; Kozloff et al., 2016; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). The program model is currently being tested in three Canadian cities as part of the [Making the Shift Demonstration Project](#).
- Housing subsidies and income supports have some of the most significant impacts on housing stabilization for youth, with studies also indicating that access to employment and employment training supports housing stability (Frederick et al., 2014; Rog & Buckner, 2007).
- Research suggests the efficacy of harm reduction approaches to housing stabilization interventions (Kreindler & Coodin, 2010), with studies indicates that this approach also leads to improved mental health (Powell et al., 2016).

Gaps in Knowledge

Regrettably, there remain several large gaps in the literature on pathways into and out of homelessness. While the causes and conditions of youth homelessness have been well-established, we know much less about what effectively stabilizes housing for youth in the long term. Few studies have been longitudinal, and many housing-based interventions fail to track or evaluate housing stability after programs or supports/services have ended. Despite important emerging literature in this area (Karabanow et al., 2018; Kidd et al., 2011; Thulien et al., 2018), we have limited knowledge about what keeps young people housed after they have exited housing programs or as they transition into other life stages or events (e.g., parenthood). This is particularly true for youth facing multiple intersecting forms of oppression, such as Indigenous youth and LGBTQ2S+ identifying youth, who face additional challenges inequities (Schwan et al., 2018a). Similarly, research has largely failed to consider the ways in which gender shapes experiences of transitions out of homelessness. For example, research demonstrates that young women experiencing homelessness are highly vulnerable to violence (Gaetz et al., 2016), experience greater mental health challenges than young men (Kidd et al., 2017). No studies have explored how these gendered experiences shape young women’s lives post-homelessness.

Similarly, while evidence suggests that social isolation and loneliness undermines housing stability for youth who have transitioned out of homelessness (Thulien et al., 2018), we have little research on what *promotes* social inclusion, belonging, and community. This may be particularly critical for youth from communities whose

political, economic, and social inclusion has been marginalized, including Indigenous youth and youth of colour.

We also have limited understandings of how young peoples' migration between communities, regions, and provinces/territories impacts their access to services, supports, benefits, and housing. Once again, this is a particular gap for Indigenous youth, who face unique challenges in part due to provincial/territorial jurisdictional issues. Future research is needed to understand how migration between communities impacts youth homelessness prevention and housing stabilization efforts, accounting for the ongoing structural challenges that youth face.

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