

WITHOUT A HOME: THE NATIONAL YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SURVEY

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Canadian
Observatory on
Homelessness

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REPORT #14

A WAY HOME
VERS UN CHEZ-SOI
CANADA



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The
Orange
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Housing and hope
for homeless youth



WITHOUT A HOME:

The National Youth Homelessness Survey

Stephen Gaetz, Bill O’Grady, Sean Kidd, Kaitlin Schwan

COH RESEARCH REPORT #14

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Also supporting this research was **A Way Home Canada**, a national coalition to prevent and end youth homelessness.

This research would not have been possible without the dedicated work of the **National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness**, and 57 youth-serving agencies across the country, all of whom actively engaged young people to complete the survey. Deep collaboration with our partners made this work possible and forms the backbone of this study.

Most importantly, the authors would like to thank the young people with lived experience for taking part and lending their voices to our study.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

continues to be a seemingly intractable problem in Canada. We believe there are solutions, and that means leveraging the best knowledge we have to do things differently.

The *Without a Home* study is the first pan-Canadian study of young people who experience homelessness. With 1,103 respondents from 47 different communities across 10 provinces and territories, this study's sample size has enabled us to conduct detailed analyses and to draw important conclusions.

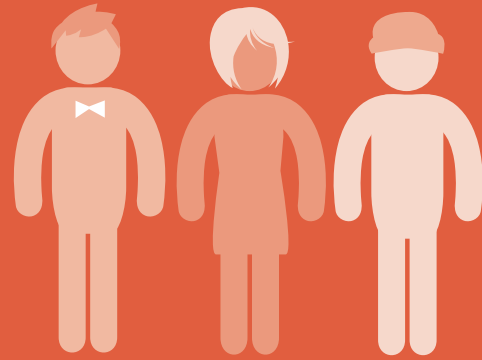
Without a Home demonstrates that with respect to youth homelessness, we are waiting much too long to intervene. In many jurisdictions, services for young people who experience homelessness are not available until they are 16 or even 18. The evidence presented here suggests that by that time, a lot of damage has already occurred.

In this report, we outline the need for a prevention-focused approach that prioritizes systems integration and Housing First for Youth (HF4Y). Our current systems tend to focus on the provision of supports downstream, when young people are much older. Rather than focusing on preventing the problem or reducing the negative outcomes of youth homelessness, we are more likely to wait for a major rupture or crisis, or when the problems facing the young person become much more acute. This report vividly demonstrates the suffering caused by this approach: housing precarity, violence, marginalization, health challenges, and social exclusion.

By failing to implement more effective strategies to address youth homelessness, we are undermining the human rights of these youth.

If we really want better outcomes for these young people, we must do better. This survey provides policy makers, service providers, researchers, and the general public with some important baseline information about youth homelessness in Canada. The challenge we face now is mobilizing this knowledge to ensure that each and every young person has access to housing, safety, education, and supports.

Young people who are homeless (ages 13-24) make up approximately 20% of the homeless population in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2014).



Over the course of the year there are between 35,000–40,000 young people who experience homelessness, and on any given night between 6,000–7,000.

57.6%
identified
as male

36.4%
identified
as female

29.5%
*identified as
LGBTQ2S*

30.6%
*identified as
Indigenous*

28.2%
*identified as members of
racialized communities*

1.8%
*identified as
transgender*

1.8%
*identified as
two-spirit*

2.5%
*identified as
gender non-binary*

10.1%
*were born
outside Canada*

BECOMING HOMELESS: PATHWAYS INTO HOMELESSNESS FOR YOUTH

For youth, the pathways into homelessness are complex. To address youth homelessness in Canada, we need to understand the intersecting individual, relational, institutional, and structural factors that cause some youth to lose their housing. Four key findings of this study help us understand how youth become homeless.

1. Early Experiences of Homelessness

Many homeless youth became homeless before they were 16, and youth who leave home at a younger age experience greater adversity on the streets.

For many young people, their first experience of homelessness occurs well before they are entitled to access interventions and supports. Strikingly, 40.1% of participants reported that they were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness. Importantly, our findings show that youth who leave home at an earlier age not only experience increased hardship before they become homeless, but they also experience greater adversity once on the streets.

40.1%

were younger than 16 when they first experienced homelessness

THOSE WHO LEAVE HOME AT AN EARLY AGE ARE MORE LIKELY TO:

- Experience multiple episodes of homelessness
- Be involved with child protection services
- Be tested for ADHD
- Experience bullying
- Be victims of crime once homeless, including sexual assault
- Have greater mental health and addictions symptoms
- Experience poorer quality of life
- Attempt suicide
- Become chronically homeless

2. Housing Instability

Homeless youth often have multiple episodes of homelessness and experience housing instability for years prior to their current experience of homelessness.

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. Amongst those who had multiple experiences of homelessness, 63% had between two and five experiences, and more than one third (37%) had more than five experiences.

Importantly, youth who left home before they were 16 were much more likely to experience multiple episodes of homelessness, with just 13.7% reporting only one experience of homelessness. Of those with multiple experiences (86.7%), a shocking 50% (49.8%) reported five or more episodes. Groups that also reported higher rates of multiple experiences included transgender and gender non-binary youth (82.8%), LGBTQ2S youth (80.2%), and Indigenous youth (80.4%).

24.1%

reported being homeless only once

75.9%

had experienced multiple episodes of homelessness

36.9%

had more than five experiences of homelessness

TRANSGENDER AND LGBTQ2S YOUTH ARE MORE LIKELY TO LEAVE HOME AT AN EARLY AGE. THESE YOUTH ARE ALSO MUCH MORE LIKELY TO REPORT PARENTAL CONFLICT AND CHILDHOOD PHYSICAL, SEXUAL, AND/OR EMOTIONAL ABUSE AS CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THEIR HOMELESSNESS.

“I feel worthless sometimes, the fact that I’m staying at a shelter. However, I feel a lot safer being shielded from the mental abuse from my parents.”

YOUTH, 23

3. Involvement in Child Protection

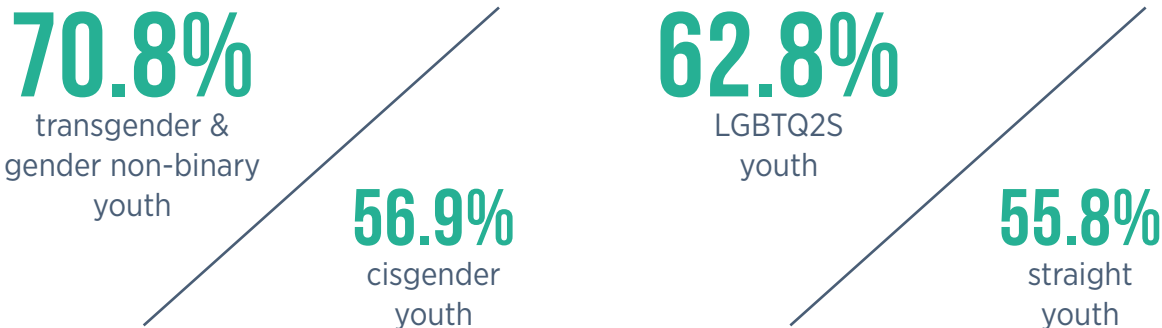
A high percentage of homeless youth experienced childhood abuse and involvement with child protection services, often beginning at a very young age.

A high percentage of young people in our sample (63.1%) experienced childhood trauma and abuse. A total of 51.1% reported experiencing physical abuse as a child or adolescent, 24% reported experiencing sexual abuse, and 47.5% reported experiencing other forms of violence and abuse. Given this, it shouldn't be a surprise that 57.8% of youth indicated that they had some kind of involvement with child protection services in the past. On average, youth became involved with child protection services at the age of 8.5, and for one third (31.5%) involvement began before the age of 6.

INDIGENOUS YOUTH (70.5%) WERE MORE LIKELY THAN YOUTH WHO WERE MEMBERS OF RACIALIZED COMMUNITIES (43.5%) AND WHITE YOUTH (55.1%) TO REPORT INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES.

Youth who left home for the first time before the age of 16 were much more likely to report involvement with child protection services (73.3%). Transgender and gender non-binary youth were more likely to report child protection services involvement than cisgender youth (70.8% vs. 56.9%), and LGBTQ2S youth were more likely to report involvement with child protection services than straight youth (62.8% vs. 55.8%). Importantly, young people who experience forms of adversity prior to becoming homeless, such as child protection involvement, physical and sexual abuse, and neglect, were more likely to experience poorer mental health, suicide attempts, lower quality of life, and negative psychological resilience.

LIKELIHOOD OF INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES



4. Challenges in School

Homeless youth have high drop out rates and experience numerous challenges in school, including bullying and difficulties related to learning disabilities.

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.

50%

*reported being tested
for a learning disability*

83%

*reported they had
experienced bullying
at school*

YOUTH’S EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS

As the largest pan-Canadian study on youth homelessness, this report offers the most comprehensive data to date on Canadian youth’s *experiences* of homelessness. Our findings reveal seven key ways in which these youth are suffering:

- **Ongoing housing instability** – Participants reported housing instability both before they were homeless and once they were on the streets. Over half had stayed in more than one location the previous month, and 10.2% stayed in more than five places.

- **High levels of chronicity** – Almost one third of the young people (31.4%) in our study were chronically homeless, meaning they were continuously homeless for more than one year, and 21.8% were episodically homeless, reporting multiple experiences of homelessness over the past three years. Of those who are identified as chronically homeless, 60% reported being homeless for three years or more.
- **Nutritional vulnerability** – While 26.8% of youth reported having access to good quality food when they need it, almost half (46.3%) experienced this once a week or less. One of the consequences of this is that when asked if they have enough energy for everyday life, one third (34.7%) reported that they have little or no energy on a day-to-day basis.
- **Declining mental health** – A very high percentage of respondents (85.4%) reported high symptoms of distress. Within our sample, 42% of participants reported at least one suicide attempt and 35.2% reported having at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization. Exposure to street sexual and physical violence also made youth over three times as likely to experience high mental health risks.
- **Low school participation** – While the drop out rate in Canada now sits below 9%, for homeless youth the rate is 53.2%. Of those who dropped out, however, 73.9% would like to return to school.
- **Unemployment** – In our survey, three quarters (75.7%) of youth indicated they were unemployed, and only 19.7% currently had jobs. This is in contrast to an unemployment rate of 13.3% amongst youth in the general Canadian public. Strikingly, 50.5% of youth participants were not in employment, education, or training.
- **Criminal victimization** – While 19% of Canadians report being a victim of crime in any given year, 68.7% of our sample had been victims of a crime. Only 7.6% of Canadians report being the victim of a violent crime, compared with 59.6% of homeless youth who report violent victimization, including high rates of sexual assault. Young women (37.4%) and transgender/gender non-binary youth (41.3%) reported higher levels of sexual assault over the previous 12 months.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? ADDRESSING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

Prevention

This report clearly demonstrates that with respect to youth homelessness, we are waiting much too long to intervene. We cannot end youth homelessness without stopping the flow into homelessness – this means focusing on prevention. It is clear that our efforts need to shift from a prolonged crisis response to ensuring that each young person’s experience of homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring. There are several key components to this work:

- **Family First** – Family First supports young people at risk of homelessness through family reconnection, using case management supports to help mediate conflicts, strengthen relationships, and nurture natural supports. This assists young people to remain in their communities, near schools, peers, and families.
- **Early intervention** – Place-based early intervention programs bring services and supports directly to young people through school, community centres, help lines, and centralized intake. Focused on intervening early for youth at risk, early intervention programs employ a case management approach that offers family supports, housing options, and educational and employment supports.

MANY HOMELESS YOUTH CYCLE IN AND OUT OF HOMELESSNESS, SCHOOL, AND WORK. WE MUST APPROACH *EACH ONE* OF THESE CYCLES AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PUT PREVENTION STRATEGIES IN PLACE AND LEVERAGE THE STRENGTHS OF THESE YOUTH.

- **School-community partnerships** – School-based prevention approaches can help the education system identify and quickly intervene when young people are at risk of homelessness or dropping out of school. These programs provide the necessary supports to reduce these risks, strengthen families, and keep youth in place. Typically based on collaborations between schools and local community services, these partnerships require a coordinated and strategic systems approach.

- **Transitional supports for young people leaving care** – To reduce the risk that young people transitioning from care become homeless, we need to do more than reform child protection laws or extend the age of care. Effective strategies must involve partnerships between government, child protection services, and experienced community-based service providers to transform the system for these youth.

Housing First for Youth

Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) adapts the successful Housing First model to meet the needs of developing adolescents and young adults. As a program intervention, it means moving youth out of homelessness as quickly as possible with no preconditions. Young people are provided with a range of housing options, including returning home (with supports), supportive housing, transitional housing, and scattered site independent living. Key to this approach is that young people are provided with a range of supports that will help them maintain housing, learn life skills, have positive relationships with peers and adults, and re-engage with school, employment training, and/or employment. Shifting to HF4Y means providing homeless youth with the same housing and wrap-around supports that would help any young person make a successful transition to adulthood.

Systems Integration

Our research findings demonstrate that the drivers of youth homelessness include family breakdown, interpersonal violence, housing instability, mental health and addictions issues, and problematic transitions from government institutions such as child protection. This means that the causes and conditions of youth homelessness touch on many key institutions in society, including healthcare, education, child protection, justice, and employment supports, all in addition to housing. This means that to address youth homelessness, federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments must take an integrated systems approach from within government. In other words, youth homelessness cannot be tackled by a single ministry or department.

“One of the problems about group homes are a lack of stability. It’s hard enough without being a human pinball.”

MAN, 19

As opposed to a fragmented collection of services, an integrated systems response requires that programs, services, and service delivery systems are organized at every level – from policy, to intake, to service provision, to client flow – based on the needs of the young person.

A key way to implement an integrated systems response is to develop a community plan to prevent and end youth homelessness. The most effective approach is to use a ‘collective impact’ approach through engaging community leaders, service providers, institutions (e.g., health care, justice), different orders of government, funders, the non-profit and private sectors, and people affected by homelessness. In developing any plan to end youth homelessness, youth with lived experience must be part of the planning process.

COMMUNITY PLANNING

A COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY PLAN TO PREVENT AND END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IS ONE THAT IS *INCLUSIVE* IN ITS PROCESS, *STRATEGIC* IN ITS OBJECTIVES, SETS REAL AND MEASURABLE *TARGETS FOR CHANGE*, IS *CLEAR* TO ALL STAKEHOLDERS, AND LEADS TO *REAL CHANGES* IN YOUNG PEOPLE’S LIVES. A WAY HOME CANADA HAS DEVELOPED A COMPREHENSIVE **COMMUNITY PLANNING TOOLKIT** TO SUPPORT THIS WORK.

Addressing Educational Challenges

Our report demonstrates a very high drop out rate among homeless youth, despite most of these youth wanting to attend school. More must be done to support young people who experience homelessness to reengage in school and achieve success. This includes ensuring that necessary supports are in place for those young people who are marginalized because of learning disabilities or bullying. A key strategy should be ensuring that programmatic supports are in place for young people while they are homeless, as well as within programs that help youth exit homelessness, such as HF4Y. If we want positive, long-term benefits for young people who have experienced homelessness, we have to help them get back to school and succeed in the school system.

Fostering Resilience and Mental Health Supports

Our report documents the severe mental health risks that youth without housing face in Canada. However, our data also reveals that homeless youth have remarkable resources. We must foster the resilience of these youth, leverage their assets, and mitigate the mental health risks posed by life on the streets. Key recommendations include:

- We must intervene *before* youth become homeless given the strong connections between mental health risk, child protection involvement, and exposure to violence prior to becoming homelessness.
- We must *rapidly* mobilize early interventions for youth given that the longer youth are on the streets, the worse their mental health outcomes.
- Mental health supports for racialized and Indigenous youth must be culturally relevant and account for the systemic discrimination faced by these groups.
- We must develop interventions that are tailored to meet the high mental health risks experienced by LGBTQ2S youth. Tailored approaches might include connecting youth with LGBTQ2S-positive communities and spaces.
- Services must be developed to address the unique and greater needs female youth are facing.

Perhaps most importantly, our findings highlight that mental health and addictions issues among homeless youth are driven by experiences of violence, marginalization, and poverty. If we hope to address these mental health challenges, we must address the structural and systemic drivers of youth homelessness.

Fortifying Natural Supports

Positive relations with family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and meaningful adults are all assets that help young people move into adulthood in a healthy way. Our study found that many homeless youth stay connected with these ‘natural supports’ while homeless, and that these supports are important to them. Many youth indicated they want improved relationships with family members. It is important that those helping young people who are homeless see the value in helping young people reconnect with their families and communities. These connections can be instrumental in helping young people survive on the streets and move out of homelessness.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

Government of Canada

1. The Government of Canada should implement a Youth Homelessness Strategy supported by a targeted investment.
2. The Prime Minister, as the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Youth, should convene an Inter-Ministerial planning and coordination table.

Provincial and Territorial Governments

1. All provincial and territorial governments should implement targeted strategies to prevent and end youth homelessness as part of their broader homelessness strategies.
2. Focus strategy on supporting young people who are under 16 and are at risk of homelessness.
3. Ensure young people who are transitioning from child protection services are supported in a way that ensures housing stability and ongoing support.
4. Provincial Ministries of Justice, Corrections, and the Attorney General should address youth homelessness.
5. Provincial Ministries of Education should be mandated to support early intervention strategies to prevent youth homelessness.
6. Provincial Ministries of Health should ensure that young people and their families have adequate supports for mental health and addictions challenges.

Communities and Municipalities

1. All communities and/or municipalities should plan and implement strategies to prevent and end youth homelessness.
2. Communities should focus on prevention and strategies to move young people out of homelessness instead of expanding emergency services.
3. Community strategies should focus on systems integration to facilitate smooth transitions from homelessness and ensure no young person slips through the cracks.

4. Community strategies should necessarily ensure that local and program responses take account of the needs of priority populations.
5. Enable all young people who experience homelessness to reengage with education and training.
6. Make 'family reconnect' supports available to all young people who come in contact with the system.
7. Housing First for Youth should be broadly applied as both a community philosophy and as a program intervention.
8. In working with young people, communities should focus not just on risks, but assets and resilience.
9. Mental health and addictions needs of young people should be prioritized in community planning and service delivery.
10. Foster meaningful youth engagement in all policy development, planning, and implementation processes.



SECTION 1:
INTRODUCTION

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

is a significant problem in Canada,
and one that we must urgently address.

In a caring and affluent society, it is unacceptable that any young person becomes entrenched in homelessness as a result of family breakdown and systems failures. Despite little evidence that we are reducing youth homelessness, we continue to rely on crisis responses such as emergency shelters and day programs. Worse, it is objectionable to simply rely on a crisis response to address the issue, in essence expecting young people to ‘bootstrap’ themselves out of homelessness. Numerous studies have demonstrated the harmful consequences of allowing young people to remain in an extended state of homelessness, and yet few communities in Canada have youth-specific systems or strategies to help youth transition quickly into housing. We are not making sufficient progress in this regard and too many young people remain stuck in homelessness.

What role can research play in developing and implementing more effective solutions to youth homelessness?

For any complex problem we face as a society, be it in the realm of the economy, the environment, healthcare, gender equity, or the justice system, research can and should provide evidence that supports and guides the work of governments and those delivering services. It is impossible to imagine our healthcare system functioning as well as it does without key research providing direction. This is also true of complex social and economic issues such as youth homelessness.

As communities across Canada move toward more permanent and effective solutions to youth homelessness, better data is needed to understand the problem and design effective solutions. With this goal in mind, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, in partnership with A Way Home Canada (and funded by the Home Depot Canada Foundation), conducted the very first Canadian youth homelessness survey between October and December 2015. The survey was administered by agencies across the country, the outcome of this is *Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*.

While there is a large body of research on youth homelessness, virtually all studies have focused on individual cities and towns across the country, with a few comparing a handful of locations. Most of these studies have been conducted in larger cities such as Toronto, Victoria, Calgary, and Halifax (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Albert et al., 2015; Karabanow, 2004; O’Grady et al., 2011; Worthington & MacLaurin, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2013), making it difficult to generalize to the whole of Canada. The regional differences between communities, including vastly different populations sizes, demographics, social and health infrastructures, and policy contexts, make it difficult to offer a national picture of youth homelessness. It is this gap in knowledge that the *Without A Home* project aims to fill.

The *Without a Home* project is national in scale and scope.

We surveyed 1,103 young people experiencing homelessness from 47 different communities across 10 provinces and territories. Our sample size is sufficiently large enough to conduct detailed analyses of the results and draw important conclusions about the nature and extent of youth homelessness in Canada. We are now able to provide baseline data to answer questions related to the causes and conditions of youth homelessness, as well as who makes up the youth homeless population. Importantly, future community studies of youth homelessness will be able to compare their results to this national data.

1,103

young people experiencing homelessness surveyed

47

different communities

10

provinces & territories

Our approach to data analysis was designed to provide solid information and evidence to enhance our knowledge and understanding of pathways into homelessness, demographics of the population, and the conditions young people experience once they are homeless.

Our hope is that this research will contribute to more effective plans, strategies and interventions, at the national, regional and local levels, that can prevent and end youth homelessness in Canada. The results can also be used to mobilize community action on youth homelessness, particularly in areas where there may be a perception that youth homelessness is not a real problem.

Importantly, while this is a rigorous, scientific study, this is not simply ‘research for research’s sake’. Our goal is to produce results that will contribute to a national dialogue on youth homelessness, and give communities information they need to develop more effective responses to youth homelessness. Good information should be the foundation of any effective planning and implementation strategy.

Historically, communities have relied on emergency services and a crisis response to support young people who are homeless. Despite our best intentions, by simply managing a crisis, we are in fact creating harm to the many young people who experience homelessness, to their families, and to our communities.

Research has demonstrated that the longer a young person remains homeless, the worse their health and well-being become, and the more likely they are to experience exploitation, trauma and addictions, drop out of school and become entrenched in street life. There is a growing recognition that it is not enough to simply ‘manage’ the problem. The question to be asked is: Can we do things differently? Can we shift from merely managing the problem, to preventing and ending youth homelessness in Canada?



Research has demonstrated that the longer a young person remains homeless, the worse their health and well-being become, and the more likely they are to experience exploitation, trauma and addictions, drop out of school and become entrenched in street life.

There is a growing recognition that it is not enough to simply 'manage' the problem.

The question to be asked is: Can we do things differently? Can we shift from merely managing the problem, to preventing and ending youth homelessness in Canada?

METHODOLOGY

How was the research conducted?

This study reports data from the 2015 *Without a Home: National Youth Homelessness Survey*. Between October and December 2015, the survey was administered through 57 agencies serving homeless youth in 47 communities across the country. This self-report survey collected a broad range of demographic information and assessed a range of pre- and post-homelessness variables. Upon receiving the returned surveys, data was cleaned and resulted in 1,103 useable surveys. Data was analyzed using SPSS.

The survey team that put together the research instrument includes Dr. Stephen Gaetz (York University), Dr. Sean Kidd (CAMH, University of Toronto), and Dr. Bill O'Grady (University of Guelph). This team was supported by an advisory committee of homeless youth service providers coordinated by A Way Home Canada and the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness. The overall project was guided by Claire Major, Research Associate with the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

1,103
useable surveys

57
*agencies serving
homeless youth*

47
*communities across
the country*

REPORT FORMAT

The report is organized in the following way:



SECTION 2 – WHO IS HOMELESS?

In seeking to better understand youth homelessness in Canada, this section explores the diversity of youth who find themselves without housing. Youth’s intersecting identities shape their pathways into, and experiences of, homelessness. This section explores the make up of the population of youth experiencing homelessness, focusing on gender (including transgender and gender non-binary youth), LGBTQ2S youth, members of racialized communities, Indigenous youth, and newcomers to Canada.



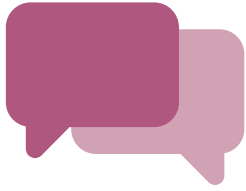
SECTION 3 – BECOMING HOMELESS

In this section we examine the factors that contribute to youth homelessness. We explore a range of determinants, including family conflict, a history of abuse, involvement in child protection services, and challenges at school. We also explore pathways into homelessness, including when young people first experience homelessness and their history of housing instability.



SECTION 4 – LIFE ON THE STREETS: THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING HOMELESS

In this section we examine what happens once young people become homeless. We focus on their housing situation and the length of time they spend without housing (chronicity), as well as their health, mental health, and well-being. We also explore young people’s involvement in employment, education and crime, as well as their experience of criminal victimization. Importantly, we conclude by exploring assets and resilience among young people experiencing homelessness. All too often we only consider risk factors and impacts. Our research shows that we must also understand the strengths of young people and the importance of supportive relationships.



SECTION 5 – DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings of *Without a Home* point to the dire consequences of our current approach to youth homelessness and underscore the need for policy and practice change. In this section, we review the needs of priority populations and make policy and practice recommendations. Given the long and difficult pathways into homelessness for many young people, we suggest the need for a prevention model to end youth homelessness. In response to the clear harms that result from prolonged homelessness, we argue more should be done to move young people out of homelessness as quickly as possible. Building on these recommendations, we explore opportunities for systems-based community planning, education and employment, as well as options for addressing mental health challenges, and building resilience and assets.



SECTION 6 – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the preceding discussion, this section provides a range of recommendations that will shift our response to preventing and ending youth homelessness, and provide better outcomes for those who experience it.



SECTION 2:
WHO IS HOMELESS?

YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS

(ages 13-24) make up approximately 20% of the homeless population in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2014).

Over the course of the year there are between 35,000–40,000 young people who experience homelessness, and on any given night between 6,000–7,000. Our definition of youth homelessness is drawn from the *Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness* (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016).

CANADIAN DEFINITION OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

“Youth homelessness” refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 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.

Youth homelessness is a complex social issue because as a society we have failed to provide young people and their families with the necessary and adequate supports that will enable them to move forward with their lives in a safe and planned way. In addition to experiencing economic deprivation and a lack of secure housing, many young people who are homeless lack the personal experience of living independently and at the same time may be in the throes of significant developmental (social, physical, emotional and cognitive) changes. As a result, they may not have the resources, resilience, education, social supports or life skills necessary to foster a safe and nurturing transition to adulthood and independence. Few young people choose to be homeless, nor wish to be defined by their homelessness, and the experience is generally negative and stressful.

Youth homelessness is the denial of basic human rights and once identified as such, it must be remedied. All young people have the right to the essentials of life, including adequate housing, food, safety, education and justice.

2.1 Diversity

In seeking to understand youth homelessness in Canada, it is essential that we acknowledge the incredible diversity of youth who find themselves without housing. In developing solutions, we need to account for these important demographic differences, including gender and sexual orientation, as well as the unique needs of specific populations, such as Indigenous youth, members of racialized communities, and newcomers. We do this with the knowledge that these categories are not discrete and that many homeless youth experience intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination. The key point is that these differences matter in terms of how we understand the problem of youth homelessness as well as how we imagine the solutions. The needs of young women on the streets are not the same as the needs of young men. Sexual, gender, and racial minorities face discrimination that other youth do not. Young people from new immigrant communities face unique challenges. A successful strategy needs to ensure that these diverse needs are met. One size does not fit all.

2.2 Age

In comparison to adults, youth experiencing homelessness have unique needs because of the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social developmental changes they experience during adolescence and young adulthood (Steinberg, 2013). The cognitive development that occurs during adolescence and young adulthood significantly changes youth's conceptual and abstract thinking, as well as their decision making and risk taking. Importantly, trauma can significantly impair this development.

The young people who responded to our survey ranged in age from 12 to 27, with an average age of 19.8.

12-27

age range of respondents

19.8

average age of respondents

Young people can be grouped into three age categories:

10.6%

Early adolescence
(13-16)

49%

Mid adolescence
(17-20)

37.4%

Young adulthood
(21-24)

It is important to note that there can be significant differences between individuals in the timing and progress of changes associated with adolescence.

Interestingly, our data showed that women, LGBTQ2S youth, and newcomers tended to be younger than their homeless peers, with more reporting to be in the early to mid adolescence range.

2.3 Gender

Research on youth homelessness typically points to there being more males than females who are homeless and in contact with the system (Segaert, 2013; Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). Much of this literature shows that males typically outnumber females 2:1 (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004). Because the streets are inherently unsafe, particularly for young women, it has often been suggested that many young women are more likely to remain in precarious living situations.

Research on gender-based differences among homeless youth populations has often failed to capture the unique experiences of youth who do not identify with traditional categories of male or female. As a result, we wanted to understand the range of gender identities among youth who are homeless. We asked youth if they identified as cisgendered, transgender, gender non-binary, or two-spirit.

CISGENDER refers to people whose self-identity conforms with the gender that corresponds to their biological sex.

TRANSGENDER (including transsexual and transitioned) refers to persons “whose gender identity or lived gender varies from their sex assigned at birth” (Bauer et al., 2015, p. 2). Transgender is also used as an umbrella term and can encompass those who identify as transsexual, transitioned, genderqueer, genderfluid, and whose gender identities challenge gender norms.

GENDER NON-BINARY (also known as ‘genderqueer’ or ‘gender expansive’) refers to those whose identities do not subscribe to, or conform to, the gender binary of male or female.

Our data confirm that there are more cisgender male youth on the street than cisgender females. What is really striking about the data, however, is the large percentage of youth who identify as transgender or gender non-binary.

While about 0.5% of the Canadian population identify as transgender (Bauer et al., 2015), 1.8% of our sample identified this way.

TWO-SPIRIT refers to Indigenous persons who are LGBTQ2S or gender-variant.

TABLE 1

Gender differences within the youth homeless population

Gender	% (NUMBER)
Cisgender Male	57.6% (620)
Cisgender Female	36.4% (392)
Transgender	1.8% (90)
Gender non-binary	2.5% (27)
Two-Spirit	1.8% (19)
Total	1,077

A further 2.5% were gender non-binary and 1.8% identified as two-spirit. This means that 6.1% of the overall sample does not fit into traditional categories of male and female.

2.4 LGBTQ2S Youth

Research on youth homelessness in Canada suggests that young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or two-spirit (LGBTQ2S) are an overrepresented population (Abramovich, 2013; Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2009; Josephson & Wright, 2000). Depending on the study, the percentage who identify as LGBTQ2S has ranged between 20-40%, but these statistics have always been based on smaller, community-specific research studies. It can be inferred that this overrepresentation is an outcome of homophobia and transphobia in families, schools, and communities, making it difficult for young people to remain at home. In spite of progress over recent decades, these forms of discrimination continue to persist in Canada.

In our study, the percentage of young people experiencing homelessness who identify as LGBTQ2S is 29.5%.

Youth who are members of racialized communities are less likely to identify as LGBTQ2S (24.8%).

2.5 Indigenous Youth

It is well established that Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples, are significantly overrepresented in the homeless population in virtually every community in Canada. While Indigenous Peoples only make up 4.3% of the Canadian population, they account for between 28-34% of the shelter population (ESDC, 2016). This suggests that to address homelessness among Indigenous youth, we need to look at the historical roots of this reality. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) identified that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples have experienced historical, systematic, and ongoing discrimination and cultural genocide. If we expect to develop comprehensive, culturally appropriate solutions to homelessness among Indigenous youth, we need to heed the work and calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

In our survey, 30.6% of the sample identified as Indigenous. There was higher Indigenous representation in youth from Western provinces, including Saskatchewan (50%), Alberta (52.6%), and British Columbia (43%), compared to central Canadian provinces such as Ontario (21.5%) and Quebec (6.8%). The Atlantic provinces, compared to Western provinces, also had lower Indigenous representation than Western provinces (21.9%). Among study participants, 21% of Indigenous youth reported growing up in an Indigenous community or on a reserve, although 6.7% reported they were unsure.

29.5%

*identified as
LGBTQ2S*

30.6%

*identified as
Indigenous*

28.2%

*identified as members of
racialized communities*

2.6 Members of Racialized Communities

In the 2011 Canadian Census, 19.1% of Canadians identified themselves as visible minorities. In this report, we use the term ‘member of a racialized community’ to refer to all people who identify as non-Caucasian or non-white in colour. We also separate out Indigenous youth who do not also indicate racialized identity to allow for a focused analysis of Indigenous-relevant data, acknowledging that Indigenous Peoples do experience racialized forms of discrimination.

We prefer this term to visible minority because in some communities non-white people may be in the minority.

In our survey, 28.2% identified themselves as members of racialized communities. This includes Indigenous youth who simultaneously identify as such. Those youth who are members of racialized communities but who are not Indigenous make up 17.4% of the total sample.

2.7 Newcomers


‘Newcomers’ are youth who were born outside of Canada. According to the 2011 Canadian census, 20.6% of all Canadians were born outside the country. In our sample, only 10.1% identified that they were born outside the country. Of that group, about 25% arrived in Canada in the previous five years.

10.1%

were born outside Canada

25%

*arrived in the previous
five years*



SECTION 3:
**BECOMING
HOMELESS**

WHAT ARE THE FACTORS THAT LEAD TO HOMELESSNESS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

For youth, the pathways into homelessness are complex and somewhat individualized.

Understanding these causes means considering individual and relational factors, including family conflict and abuse, but also things like addictions and mental health issues on the part of either the young person or another family member. However, it is essential to recognize that youth homelessness *cannot* be explained by these individual and social relationship factors alone. Systems failures and structural factors are both significant drivers of youth homelessness.

Institutional or systems failures powerfully contribute to youth homelessness. We define such failures as instances in which young people who transition from institutional care – including child protection, juvenile detention or adult corrections, in-patient mental health care – become homeless because they lack access to housing or the necessary and ongoing supports needed to maintain housing. At a policy and practice level, our failure to provide adequate and effective transitional supports means we create a pipeline into homelessness.

“Kids don’t want to be homeless. They don’t want to be out there. There is this perceived notion that kids want to be partying in an apartment somewhere. They don’t. Kids go home and try to make it work so many times before they become chronically homeless. It’s unbelievable. They try and they try and they try ... Some very successfully go back home, when other pieces have been put in place to support them to do that.”

TERRILEE KELFORD, VICE-CHAIR,
CORNERSTONE LANDING YOUTH SERVICES

Finally, structural factors contribute to youth homelessness. Racism, homophobia, and transphobia mean that many young people are not able to stay in their families or communities because of bias-based discrimination. Structural changes in the economy mean that there are fewer full-time, living-wage jobs available for youth. Combined with the acute lack of affordable housing for low income Canadians, this means that more and more young people are choosing to stay in their parental/guardian household. In fact, 42.3% of all young Canadians between the ages of 20 and 29 continue to live with their parents, almost double the figure from the 1980s (Statistics Canada, 2012). A Vancouver study showed that among those who are living independently, 70% are still receiving funds from their parents (Vancouver Foundation, 2015). **If it is difficult for housed youth to move out and live independently, for young people who are forced to leave or who exit institutional care with little or no family support, the challenges of obtaining and maintaining stable housing and an adequate income are that much greater.**

In this section, we review results from our national survey to further identify key factors that contribute to youth homelessness. We look closely at pathways into homelessness and housing instability. A key finding is that a great number of young people experience problems at a very young age. Unfortunately, our systems for addressing youth homelessness tend to focus the provision of supports downstream, when young people are much older.

Rather than focusing on preventing the problem or reducing the negative outcomes of youth homelessness, we are more likely to wait for a major rupture or crisis, when the problems facing the young person (and their families) become much more acute. The findings discussed in this section suggest we need to transform our approach.

“I really think I should’ve stayed in the city I was from and stayed connected with my old friends.”

MAN, 19, FROM SMALL TOWN

3.1 Pathways into Youth Homelessness

For many young people, the route into homelessness is rarely linear or experienced as a single event. More often, youth experience multiple family ruptures and multiple episodes of living outside the home – often staying temporarily with friends or relatives. Moreover, because of the limited availability of emergency supports for youth, combined with the concentration of these supports in large urban centres, many young people are forced to leave their homes, friends, school, and communities to access these supports. It is often at the end of a long process that a young person accesses an emergency service, and along the way many sleep in unsafe and unsanitary spaces (e.g., outdoors, on rooftops, in abandoned buildings).

In a national survey conducted by Ipsos Reid, it was suggested that while youth are not generally overrepresented in the homeless population, they are twice as likely to report being homeless at some point in their lives. This means that many young people who experience homelessness are part of the ‘invisible’ or ‘hidden’ homeless population, and as a result, homeless services and supports are less likely to reach them.

“I was kicked out of my house by my mother. I had nowhere to go and had to sleep in a bank. I couch surfed many times at friends’ houses and when I couldn’t stay at friends’ houses, I slept in a staircase.”

WOMAN, 17

FIGURE 1

Pathways into homelessness

For many young people, the route into homelessness is rarely linear or experienced as a single event.



First experience of homelessness

On average, participants first left home at the age of 15.7. Significantly, 40.1% of participants were younger than 16 when they first experienced homelessness. Because many jurisdictions have no emergency services or supports for young people under 16, these youth were often unable to access crucial supports when first experiencing homelessness.

Importantly, one's age at entry into homelessness often varied in relation to their race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. For example, transgender and gender non-binary youth were more likely to report becoming homeless before the age of 16 (49.2%) than were cisgender youth (37.1%). Similarly, LGBTQ2S youth were more likely (46.7%) than heterosexual youth (37.1%) to report becoming homeless before turning 16. Finally, 45% of Indigenous youth became homeless for the first time at this early age.

15.7

average age participants first left home

40.1%

were younger than 16 when they first experienced homelessness

45%

of Indigenous youth became homeless before age 16

YOUTH WHOSE FIRST EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS CAME BEFORE AGE 16

49.2%

transgender & gender non-binary youth

37.1%

cisgender youth

46.7%

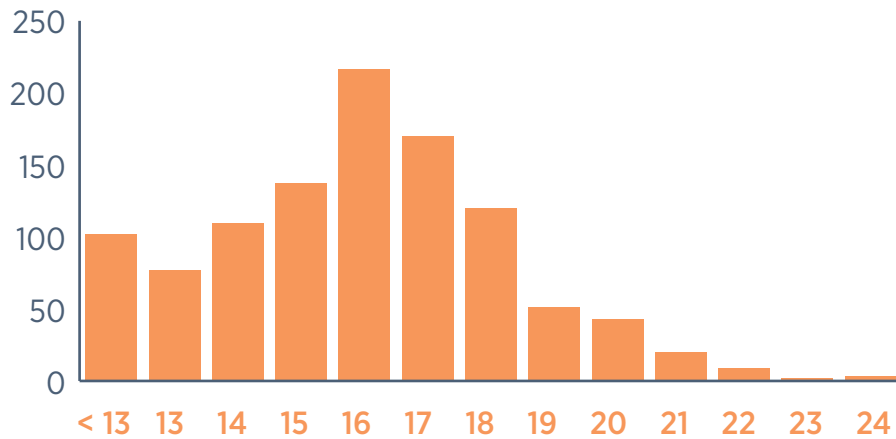
LGBTQ2S youth

37.1%

heterosexual youth

FIGURE 2

Age of first homelessness experience



A relatively large number of respondents (9.6%, 101) revealed that their first experience of homelessness occurred when they were children under the age of 13. While we did not collect data on the context of these early experiences of homelessness, it is plausible that a significant percentage of this group first lost their housing in the context of family homelessness.

9.6%
*experienced homelessness
for the first time under
the age of 13*

“I have slept in abandoned buildings, got arrested for staying there. Moved to my grandma’s, sister took over the rent and kicked me out. Moved into a friend’s place then they moved and I was thrown out with no place to go. Stayed outside of three years, moved into another apartment then moved to a house and we all got evicted. And I moved and there was a house fire and we all got told to move and that was about two months ago.”

MAN, 23

Housing Instability

As shown above, the pathways into youth homelessness are not linear. Many young people report more than one experience of homelessness prior to their current housing precarity. In our survey, only 24.1 % reported they had been homeless only once, meaning that 75.9% had experienced multiple episodes of homelessness. As can be seen from the table below, 9.8% had two experiences, 25% had three to five experiences, and 20.4% had five or more experiences. A significant percentage of those with multiple experiences of homelessness did not specify the number of incidents (14.4%). Analysis of the data from all youth who did specify a number of experiences indicates that 36.9% of youth have had more than five experiences of homelessness.

24.1%

reported being homeless only once

75.9%

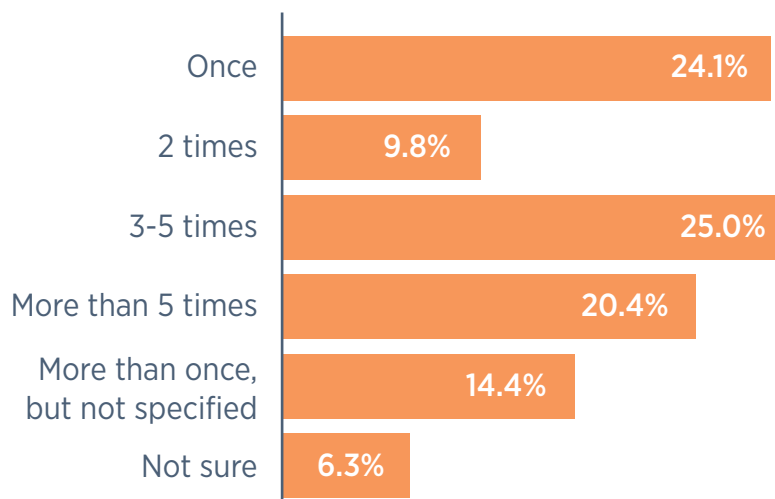
had experienced multiple episodes of homelessness

36.9%

had more than five experiences of homelessness

FIGURE 3

Number of experiences of homelessness



Importantly, our data also shows that those who left home for the first time before they were 16 were much more likely to experience multiple episodes of homelessness. Of that group, just 13.7% reported only one experience of homelessness. Among youth who had multiple experiences of homelessness (86.7%), almost 50% (49.8%) reported five or more episodes.¹ Other groups reporting higher rates of multiple experiences of homelessness included: transgender and gender non-binary youth (82.8%), LGBTQ2S youth (80.2%), Indigenous youth (80.4%), and newcomer youth (64.3%).

This high level of housing instability once again suggests that by the time young people access homelessness services, many have already experienced homelessness and housing instability multiple times over many years.

3.2 Significant Reasons For Leaving Home

Research on youth homelessness fairly consistently identifies that difficult family situations and conflict are key underlying factors that contribute to youth homelessness (Gaetz, 2014; Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow & Naylor, 2013; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Braitstein et al., 2003; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Janus et al., 1995). In our survey, we asked young people to indicate how ‘relevant’ a number of factors were in contributing to their leaving home. The results of our survey corroborate findings of family conflict and relational dysfunction.

Conflicts with parents

It is well established that a majority of youth experiencing homelessness come from homes in which there are high levels of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; interpersonal violence and assault; parental neglect; and exposure to intimate partner violence (Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz et al., 2002; Karabanow, 2004, 2009; Rew, et al., 2001; Thrane et al., 2006; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Tyler et al., 2001; Van den Bree et al., 2009; Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999). In some cases, parental psychiatric disorders (Andres-Lemay et al., 2005) and addictions (McMorris et al., 2002) may also be factors.

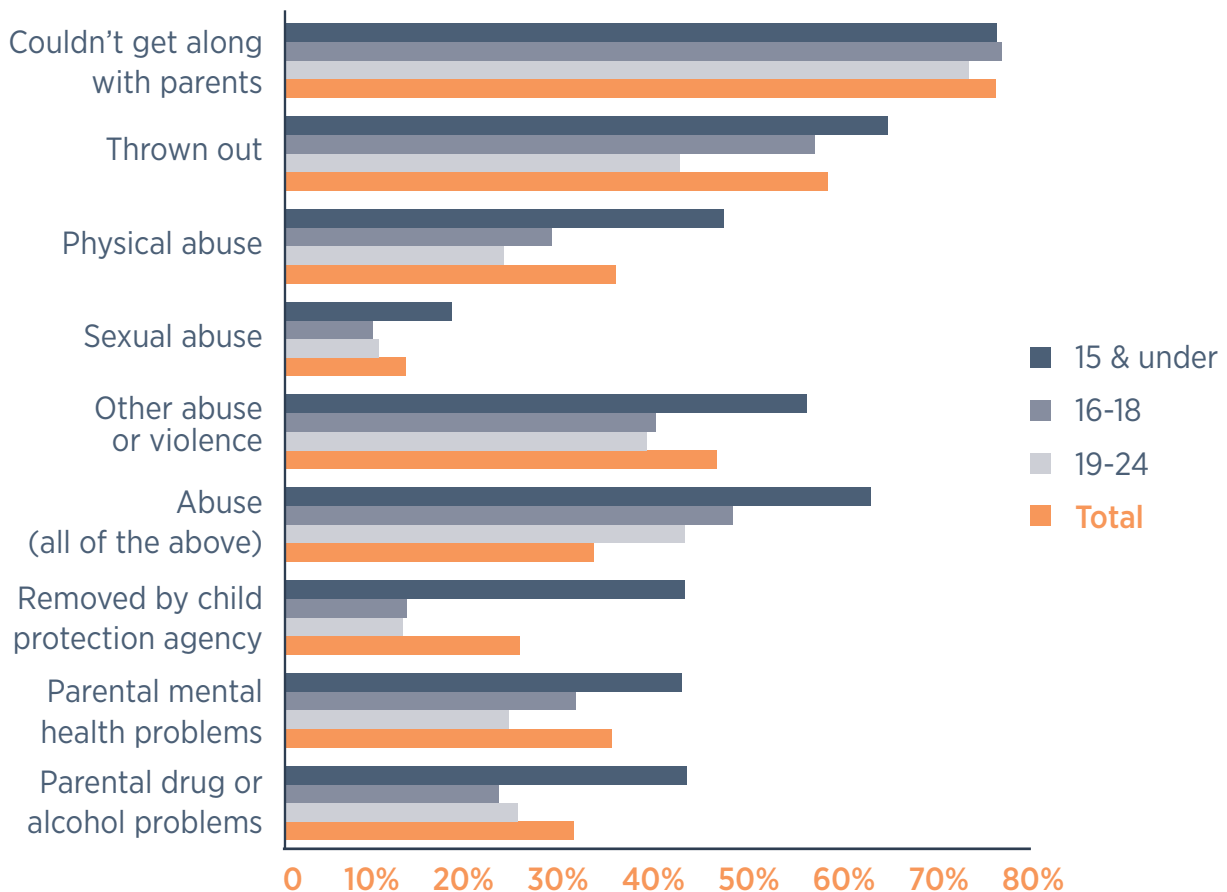
1. The latter figure (49.85%) includes only those who have had more than one experience of homelessness.

In our survey, 77.5% of the sample indicated that a key reason they left home was an inability to get along with their parents. Young people also identified that abusive relationships within the household were a significant cause of their homelessness, as were mental health and addiction problems among their parents. With respect to these causes, there were some interesting differences between those who first left home at an early age (before the age of 16) compared to those who first left in their mid-teens (16-18) and those who first left at a later age (19-24). While all age groups identified parental conflict as the major causal factor, those who first left at an early age were much more likely to identify physical, sexual, and other forms of abuse and violence as being significant, in addition to parental mental health problems and addictions (see Figure 4 below).

77.5% indicated that a key reason they left home was an inability to get along with their parents

FIGURE 4

Parental conflict as a factor contributing to homelessness - by age group



Personal factors contributing to homelessness

In seeking to understand the factors that contribute to youth homelessness, our survey also analyzed ‘personal factors.’ Personal factors refer to individual factors that may be generally characteristic of adolescence and young adulthood, including the desire for independence or leaving home to look for work, as well as factors that may pose more significant challenges, such as mental health problems, addictions, or trouble with the law.

It should be noted that strained family relations may also be an outcome of other challenges young people face, including personal substance use, mental health problems, learning disabilities, disengagement with the education system and dropping out, criminal behaviour, and involvement with the justice system (Karabanow, 2004). Again, the age at which one first left home has an impact with respect to these factors. For example, those who first left home at a young age were more likely to report challenging circumstances related to mental health, addictions, and conflict with the law as key factors, but less likely to identify seeking independence or looking for work compared to youth who left home at an older age.

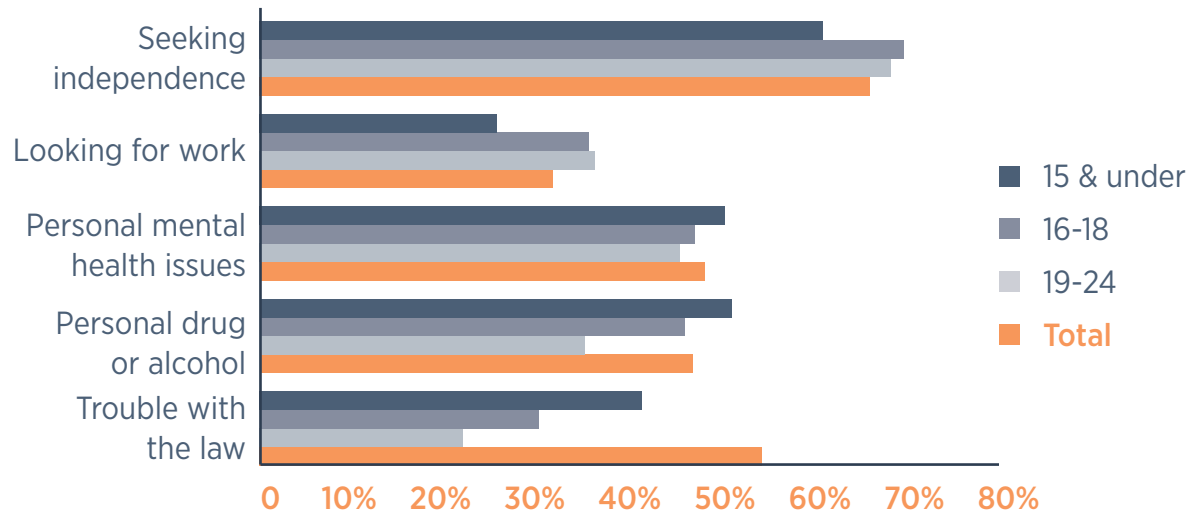
“It would have been helpful if someone acknowledged I was a child suffering from depression and maybe explained to me the feelings I felt growing up my whole life so I can understand. If people believed me when I said I was being sexually abused and took deeper and graver action. Being taken seriously. Not being told I’m not allowed to feel sorry for myself. If my foster mom stopped saying “she’s happy, she’s always smiling” and instead asked me how I felt, which she didn’t, always answer for me.”

WOMAN, 18

Identifying the intersecting causes of these circumstances is complex. It is difficult to disentangle the connections between parental behaviours (such as abuse and neglect) and the subsequent challenges youth face, such as mental health struggles (Mallet et al., 2005). Young people’s conflicts with parents can result from a number of different stressors, including the inability of children and/or their parents to adequately cope with the challenges the other is facing (Gaetz, 2014).

FIGURE 5

Personal factors contributing to homelessness - by age group



Childhood trauma and abuse

While a large number of youth identified physical, sexual, or other forms of abuse as contributing to their homelessness (53.8%), the percentage of young people in the sample who reported having experienced abuse of some kind is somewhat higher. In fact, 51.1% of the sample reported experiencing physical abuse as a child or adolescent, 24% experienced sexual abuse, and 47.5% experienced other forms of violence and abuse. Altogether 63.1% of the sample experienced one or more forms of abuse while they were young.

51.1%

experienced physical abuse as a child or adolescent

47.5%

experienced other forms of violence and abuse

24%

experienced sexual abuse

63.1%

experienced one or more forms of abuse

It should be expected that young people who were involved with child protection services are more likely to report a history of abuse. However, when one looks at priority populations and the experiences of childhood abuse, certain things stand out (see Table 2 below). Females are much more likely than males to experience all types of abuse. Transgender youth and LGBTQ2S youth also report more abuse. Significantly, abuse in childhood is strongly correlated with both multiple episodes of homelessness, and with early experiences of homelessness. Indigenous youth, members of racialized communities, and newcomers are not significantly more likely to report childhood abuse.

“If I was taken away from unfit parents it would have been good. Police were contacted countless times and everyone knew about the abuse but no one did anything. The police have never helped me in my life. I was hungry and undergoing trauma and was expected to just deal with it from a very early age.”

WOMAN, 17

TABLE 2

Childhood Experiences of Abuse by Gender, Sexual Orientation, Involvement in Child Protection, Number of Times Homeless and Early Experience of Homelessness

		Experience of Abuse in Childhood			
		PHYSICAL ABUSE	SEXUAL ABUSE	OTHER FORMS OF ABUSE	TOTAL ABUSE
Gender	Male	43.3%	12.0%	36.7%	53.6%
	Female	60.0%	38.1%	57.8%	73.5%
	Trans/Gender non-Binary	63.1%	46.0%	69.8%	80.0%
Sexual Orientation	Straight	45.7%	16.4%	39.4%	57.4%
	LGBTQ2S	64.4%	41.0%	64.3%	76.1%
In Foster Care or Group Homes	No	44.4%	19.2%	42.7%	58.9%
	Yes	58.9%	28.6%	51.0%	67.1%
Number of times homeless	Once	40.1%	13.5%	31.9%	47.4%
	2-5 times	50.3%	23.8%	46.7%	65.8%
	More than five	65.2%	38.1%	66.3%	79.5%
Age first left home	<16	62.7%	32.4%	57.9%	72.6%
	16-18	44.8%	18.0%	40.5%	58.1%
	19-21	38.3%	20.2%	39.5%	51.6%

Childhood neglect was also identified as an important causal factor in youth homelessness. Respondents were asked to assess whether they had experienced either physical neglect (lacked food, clothing, shelter) or emotional neglect (parents/guardians didn't care about their well-being) when they were young. Over 37% reported experiencing such neglect all or most of the time. Those who first left home before the age of 16 were most likely to report this form of adversity (48.6%).

One should not underestimate the severity or long-term consequences of these experiences in childhood. There is a large body of research that attests to the fact that childhood abuse, trauma, and feelings of constant fear have long-lasting consequences for brain development, decision-making, the formation of attachments, and positive social development (Anda, et al., 2006; Baker-Collins, 2013; McEwan & Sapolsky, 1995; Sokolowski, et al., 2013).

“Being on my own was very hard for me even though I know I have to try and live a better life. One thing that was very hard for me was leaving my little brother, I always worry about him. And I never thought it would be this hard but one thing for sure, I’m glad that I left home and came to a safe place.” WOMAN, 18

3.3 Past Involvement with Child Protection Services

Child protection services (also referred to in some jurisdictions as Children’s Aid or Child Welfare) are given responsibility by the State to ensure that young people are protected from harm, neglect, and/or abuse. The involvement of child protection services in families can range from primarily investigative, to providing counselling and support, to removal of the child or youth from the home, temporarily or permanent, if it is deemed to be unsafe.

Research on youth homelessness consistently points to the high percentage of homeless youth who have had some prior involvement with child protection services, including foster care, group home placements, or youth custodial centres (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Gaetz, 2002; Gaetz, O’Grady, & Buccieri, 2009; Karabanow, 2004; Karabanow & Naylor, 2013; Nichols, 2013, 2014; Raising the Roof, 2009; Serge et al., 2002). In many ways this is not surprising given that histories of abuse are common among people experiencing homelessness and are precisely the factors that draw the interest and attention of child protection services.

Transitions from care should be a particular source of concern for us in our efforts to address youth homelessness. These transitions raise many issues. Some young people choose to leave because of bad experiences and inadequate support in group homes or foster care. Other youth simply ‘age out’² of the foster care system and are left to fend for themselves, often lacking the necessary resources and preparation for living independently at such a young age. What is the State’s obligation to young people in these cases?

A key challenge is that in most jurisdictions child protection legislation and practice have not kept pace with the social and economic changes that make it much more difficult for young people to live independently in their teens and early twenties. As discussed earlier, over 40% of young Canadians (between the ages of 20 and 29) live with their parents because of the high cost of housing, poor labour market prospects, and the need for additional educational qualifications. In this context, **child protection services that cut off support for young people at the age of 18 or even 21 leave young people in jeopardy and at risk of homelessness.**

Involvement in child protection services

In our survey, almost sixty percent (57.8%) of youth indicated some kind of involvement with child protection services in the past. Once again, it should be noted that the nature of this involvement can vary considerably, ranging from a short-term, one time only intervention, to long-term involvement. The average age when involvement in child protection began for study participants was 8.5, and for one third (31.5%) involvement began before the age of 6. The average age when involvement with child protection services ended was 12.5, but 53% reported that they were still involved with child protection services beyond the age of 16.

57.8%

indicated some kind of involvement with child protection services in the past

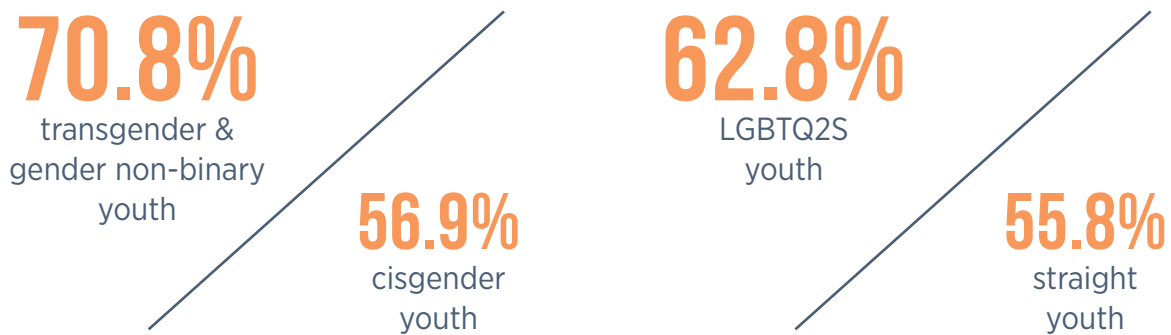
53%

were involved with child protection services beyond the age of 16

2. In Canada, child protection legislation is a provincial responsibility, and there are significant jurisdictional differences. This means that the actual age at which the State remains responsible for young people in care varies from province to province. In Ontario, for instance, young people ‘age out’ at 18, but can also voluntarily withdraw from care at 16.

Evidence of childhood trauma and abuse is often a key reason that child protection services become involved and, in some cases, take youth into care. Unfortunately, not all cases of abuse are identified and involve intervention by authorities. Of those young people who report a history of physical, sexual, and other forms of abuse in childhood, 63.8% were involved in child protection and 50.3% were taken into care. One key consideration is that a full third of those who experienced abuse do not report any involvement with child protection services (30.3%).

LIKELIHOOD OF INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES



Placement in foster care or group homes

Almost one half of all young people surveyed (47.2%) were not only involved in child protection, they also had a history of placements in foster care and/or group homes. Of the 35.2% who had been in foster care, 53% had been removed from the home before the age of ten. Among youth who had been in care, 51.9% were in care between the ages of 16 and 19. The average number of foster care placements was 3.68, but it should be noted that 60.9% reported 3 or fewer placements.

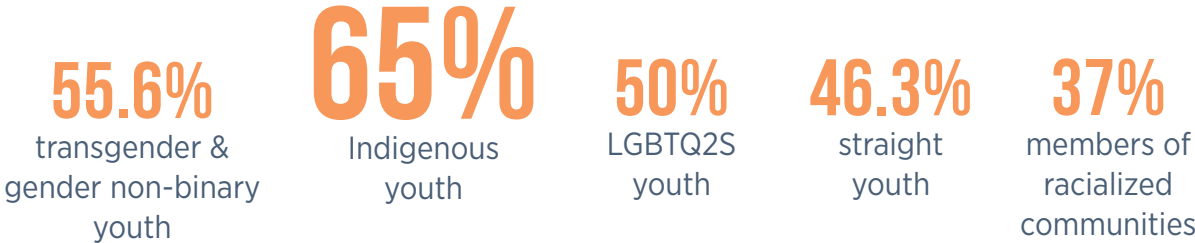
“I didn’t like the group home because this girl was always trying to fight me and I got tired of it, so I left and social workers sent me on a Greyhound to Edmonton so I could stay at a shelter.”

WOMAN, 20

47.2%
had a history of placements in foster care and/or group homes

Some important differences exist amongst youth experiencing homelessness with respect to their involvement with child protection services. Our survey found that those who left home for the first time before the age of 16 were much more likely to report involvement with child protection services (73.3%) than were those who left home for the first time between 16-18 (52.4%), or 19-24 (28.3%). Transgender and gender non-binary youth were more likely to report child protection services involvement than cisgender youth (70.8% vs. 56.9%), and LGBTQ2S youth were more likely to report involvement with child protection services than straight youth (62.8% vs. 55.8%). Similarly, Indigenous youth (70.5%) were more likely than youth who were members of racialized communities (43.5%) and white youth (55.1%) to report involvement with child protection services.

LIKELIHOOD OF PLACEMENT IN FOSTER CARE AND/OR GROUP HOMES



In considering placement in foster care and/or group homes, those with an early experience of homelessness reported higher rates (62.0%) when compared to youth who first left home between 16-18 (39.7%) or 19-24 (28.7%). Transgender and gender non-binary youth (55.6%) and Indigenous youth (65%) were more likely to be in foster care and/or group homes. LGBTQ2S youth were slightly more likely than straight youth (50.0% vs. 46.3%) to be in foster care and/or group homes, and youth who were members of racialized communities were less likely (37%).

The outcomes of difficult transitions from care

Difficult transitions from care often result in a range of negative outcomes, not least of which is housing instability and homelessness (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2012; Karabanow, 2004; Nichols, 2013, 2014; Serge et al., 2002). Our

“I had nothing set up. I was not prepared to move – turned 19 and got told I had to move.”

MAN, 24

data indicate that poor transitions are also correlated with higher rates of unemployment, lack of educational engagement and achievement, involvement in corrections, lack of skills, and poverty. In addition to inadequate income and supports, many young people who leave care fail to make the transition to independent living because of underdeveloped living skills, inadequate education, lower levels of physical and emotional well-being, and their lack of supports and resources that most young people rely on when moving into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2005). Nichols describes in detail how young people leaving care often ‘slip through the cracks’ of the numerous systems and supports intended to help marginalized youth, often resulting in housing instability and homelessness (Nichols, 2013, 2014).

Youth who were involved with child protection services cited numerous reasons for leaving care, including the fact that they ‘aged out’ (26.3%), or were returned to their family (12.3%). Importantly, of the 18.8% of youth who chose to leave care of their own accord, 16% explicitly referred to a ‘bad experience’ in care as driving their decision.

Did leaving care have an impact on youth’s subsequent experiences of homelessness?

38%

of those who ‘aged out’ of care suggested a link between that event and their subsequent homelessness

Of youth who had been in care, 30% viewed leaving the system as directly impacting their current situation of homelessness, while 49% said it wasn’t related, and the rest were unsure of the relationship. Significantly, 38% of those who ‘aged out’ suggested a link between that event and their subsequent homelessness.

It has been argued that young people leaving care should receive some level of State support while they make the difficult transition to independence. When asked whether they would have appreciated continued support after they aged out or left care, 43.2% replied yes (39.9% said no). Those who ‘aged out’ were much more likely to have said yes (57.4%) compared with 38.6% of those who chose to leave.

3.4 Experiences in School

While the drop out rate in Canada continues to fall, homeless youth remain overrepresented as having challenging and disrupted academic trajectories (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Lilledahl et al., 2013; Noble et al., 2014; O’Grady & Gaetz, 2004; O’Grady et al., 1998; Karabanow et al., 2010).

Low rates of high school completion are typically due to a combination of factors, including (often undiagnosed) learning disabilities and mental health problems, trauma, and addictions issues (either their own, or family members’). In many cases these factors may have resulted in poor school performance and disengagement

from school before becoming homeless. However, this is not the case for all young people who are homeless, and for many it is the *experience* of homelessness that leads to dropping out. Becoming homeless often means not only the loss of home, family, and friends, but also disengagement from school and adult supports within the school environment.

For some youth, the process of disengagement began before they left home. For others, the experience of becoming homeless – and the dislocation from their communities – led them to drop out. Given the centrality of educational attainment to important outcomes later in life (including employment, health, and well-being), enhancing access to education for this population should be a priority.

TABLE 3

Highest level of education

	% (NUMBER)
<Grade 9	8.1% (84)
Some High School	58.7% (608)
Failed to complete high school TOTAL	65% (692)
High School Graduate	21.1% (218)
More than High School	12% (129)

“I completed grade 11. I have pretty bad learning problems because of my FASD.”

MAN, 20

Learning disabilities

Learning disabilities describe conditions that affect the way one takes in, stores, and uses information, and can make it more difficult for young people to keep up with peers in terms of learning or functioning. Learning disabilities are not related to intelligence, and a person with a learning disability may be of average or above average intelligence. In our survey we asked a number of questions related to learning disabilities.

According to Statistics Canada, 3.2% of Canadian children have a learning disability (Statistics Canada, 2006). Youth from our sample exceed this benchmark considerably. While we were unable to measure precisely how many youth had been diagnosed with a learning disability, we did look at what percentage were tested. We consider this to be a significant indicator that young people were experiencing challenges in school relating to learning retention, achievement, engagement, and behaviour. In other words, school staff believed these youth were suffering in some way.

Survey results indicate that 50% of respondents said they were tested for a learning disability while at school.

There are also significant differences based of ethnic and racial identities and gender as it relates to the testing of learning disabilities. Within our sample, 56% of Indigenous youth reported they had been tested for a learning disability, and 59% of transgender and gender non-binary youth were tested. Finally, the age at which a youth became homeless was a statistically significant predictor of having been tested for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). For example, 56% of those who left home when they were under the age of 13 had been tested for ADHD, while only 30.6% of youth who became homeless after they were 20 were tested for ADHD. At the other end of the spectrum, racialized youth were the least likely to have been tested for a learning disability (28%).

TABLE 4

Tested for a learning disability

Ever tested at school for a learning disability?	% (NUMBER)
Yes	50% (502)
No	43% (430)
Not sure	8% (80)

Our study also showed similar findings with respect to ADHD. According to Mental Health Canada, between 3-5% of children in Canada have been diagnosed with ADHD (Statistics Canada, 2006). The results of our survey reveal that 41% of the sample had been tested for ADHD at some point during their time in school. Similar to the ethnic and racial differences we found in relation to school testing for learning disabilities, 47% of Indigenous youth were tested and 57% of gender non-binary youth were tested for ADHD at school. There was also a statistically significant relationship between the age at which a youth first left home and being tested for ADHD. Youth who left home earlier were tested more than youth who left home at an older age. More specifically, 45% of youth who left home for the first time when they were under 16 had been tested for ADHD, while only 34% of youth who became homeless after they were 20 were tested. While still well above the national average, once again racialized youth, compared to other youth in our sample, were less likely to have been tested for ADHD (29%).

TABLE 5

Tested for ADHD

Ever tested at school for ADHD?	% (NUMBER)
Yes	41% (397)
No	49% (481)
Don't know	10% (101)

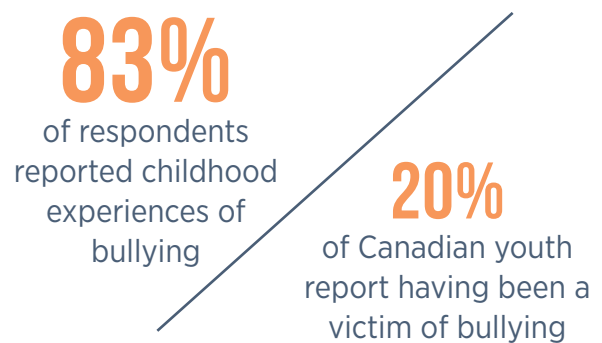
TABLE 6

Being bullied

When growing up were you ever bullied at school?	% (NUMBER)
No	17% (172)
Sometimes	37% (363)
Often	46% (453)

Bullying

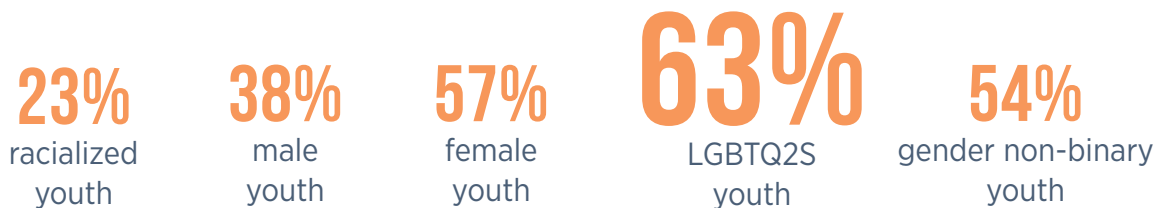
Our survey also asked questions related to other experiences youth had while in school. A striking finding was the level of bullying experienced by participants. Surprisingly, 83% reported that they experienced bullying at school either 'sometimes' (37%) or 'often' (46%).



Canadian research reveals that about 20% of Canadian youth report having

been a victim of school bullying (Hamilton, 2012). In other words, homeless youth are approximately four times more likely to experience bullying than Canadian youth in general. Once again, differences related to ethno-racial identity were evident in the sample, with 23% of racialized youth indicating they were 'often' bullied. There were also significant differences based on gender, with 38% of males indicated they were 'often' bullied, 57% of females indicating they were 'often' bullied, and 54% of gender non-binary youth reporting they were 'often' bullied. With respect to sexual orientation, LGBTQ2S youth also scored particularly high on this measure (63% indicated they were 'often' bullied). Finally, youth who left home at a young age (under 16) reported more bullying while they were in school than those who became homeless for the first time in their late teens.

HOMELESS YOUTH WHO INDICATED THEY WERE 'OFTEN' BULLIED AT SCHOOL



Factors that undermine school engagement and achievement

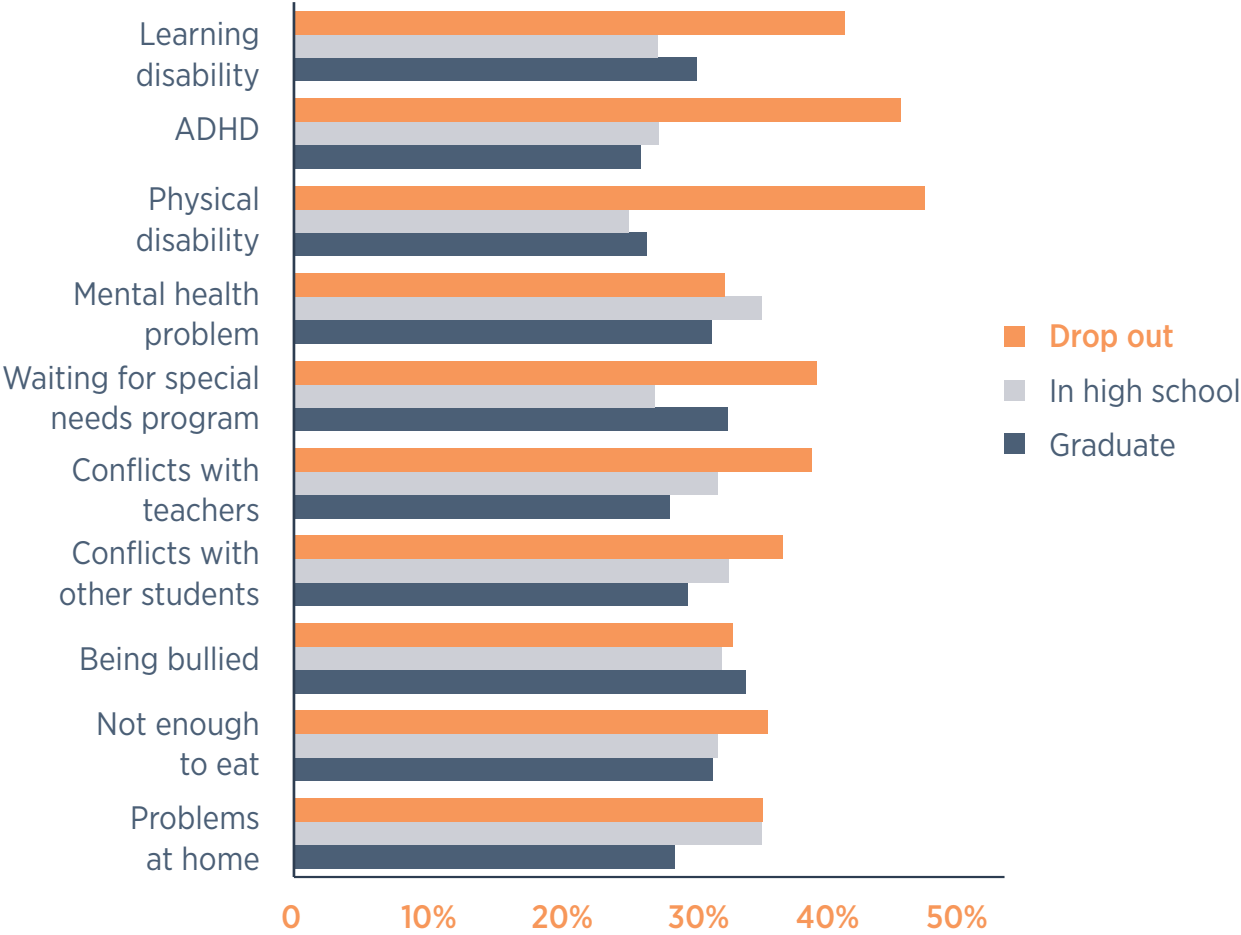
How do factors such as bullying and learning disabilities impact school engagement and achievement among youth experiencing homelessness? We asked the research participants a range of questions regarding factors that made it challenging for them to do well in school. In comparing those who dropped out of high school with those who are either currently in school or who have graduated, there are some very significant differences.

THOSE WHO DROPPED OUT WERE MORE LIKELY TO REPORT THESE CHALLENGES



FIGURE 6

Factors that undermine school engagement and achievement



Most significantly, the challenges youth identified as most significant were related to learning and physical disabilities. Those who had dropped out were much more likely to report learning disabilities (41.8%), ADHD (46.1%), and physical disabilities (47.9%) than youth in the sample with higher rates of school participation and achievement. Conflicts with teachers and other students, as well as inadequate food, were also cited. Interestingly, problems at home and being bullied were cited as less significant factors among the challenges youth faced in school.



SECTION 4:

LIFE ON THE STREETS: THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING HOMELESS

THE PATHWAYS INTO HOMELESSNESS ARE COMPLEX AND NON-LINEAR, AND ARE IN MANY WAYS UNIQUE FOR EACH INDIVIDUAL.

While family conflict is an underlying factor for most youth, it is also true that deprivation and abuse are important factors for a sizeable portion of the homeless youth population.

For some young people fleeing such situations, moving to the streets may be experienced as freedom. For most, however, the experience of homelessness can create, contribute to, or compound a range of problems. Homelessness has been correlated with the following problems for youth:

- **Worsening health and greater risk of injury** (Boivan, et al. 2005; Gaetz et al., 2010; MacKay, 2013; Yonge Street Mission, 2009)
- **Nutritional vulnerability** (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2006; Tarasuk et al., 2009a, 2009b; Tarasuk & Dachner, 2013)
- **Increased likelihood of psychological problems and addictions** (Boivan, 2005; Gaetz et al., 2010; Kidd, 2004, 2013; Kidd & Kral, 2002; MacKay, 2013; Yonge Street Mission, 2009)
- **Exposure to early sexual activity, exploitation, and safety issues** (Saewyc et al., 2013; Tyler, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2000)
- **Increased risk of criminal victimization** (Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002, 2010, 2013)
- **Greater likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system** (Baron, 2013; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; O’Grady et al., 2011)
- **Earlier incidence of dropping out of school** (Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; 2013; Liljedahl et al., 2013; Noble et al., 2014)
- **Entrenchment in the street youth lifestyle** (Gaetz, 2014; Karabanow, 2004)

In addition, because services and resources are not always adequate, young people often experience:

- Difficulty accessing safe and affordable housing, services, and supports, sometimes because of how those supports are organized or because of age restrictions
- LGBTQ2S youth experience barriers and challenges to accessing healthcare and support services due to a lack of LGBTQ2S culturally competent staff and homophobic and transphobic discrimination (Abramovich, 2012, 2013)
- Early onset of adult responsibilities without the requisite ongoing supports (including income, housing, and supportive adults in their lives) to assist with this transition to adulthood
- Challenges obtaining and maintaining paid employment
- Challenges to educational participation and achievement
- Homelessness systems and services that focus on short-term emergency supports and/or rush youth into independent living (Baker-Collins, 2013; Bellot, 2005; Boivan et al., 2005; Gaetz et al., 2010; Gaetz et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2014a; Karabanow, 2004, 2009; Kidd, 2004, 2009, 2013; Kulick et al., 2011; Milburn et al., 2009; Saewyc et al., 2013).

“People tend to believe kids who end up in shelters and/or living on welfare are all messed up, undisciplined delinquents when a lot of the time none of it is their fault. I am not a bad person. Don’t make me out to be.”

WOMAN, 16

One of the negative consequences of housing instability and homelessness for youth is that they are thrust into adult roles (e.g., getting a job, finding housing, financial management, sexual relations) at an accelerated rate. This occurs alongside limited access to many of the institutions and activities that are designed to help them navigate the transition to adulthood (e.g., school, experiential learning, adult mentoring).

In this section, we explore the current situations and experiences of young people in Canada who have become homeless.

4.1 Housing

Housing instability is something that many young people experience prior to becoming homeless. For many, this precarity continues in more severe ways once on the streets. We asked young people to describe the number and range of places they had stayed in the previous month. While almost half (44.5%) stayed in one place, most did not. Fully one third had stayed at three or more places, and 10.2% reported staying at more than five. Based on the **Canadian Definition of Homelessness** typology, youth reported experiencing the following forms of homelessness:

TABLE 7

Where youth stayed in the past month

Housing situation (note that 55.5% stayed in more than one place)	% (NUMBER)
1) 'Unsheltered' refers to being absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation (including rooftops, in cars, under bridges, etc.)	32.3% (356)
2) 'Emergency sheltered' refers to those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence	29.2% (322)
3) 'Provisionally accommodated' refers to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure	
Staying with friends or relatives	41.3% (455)
Transitional housing	17.3% (191)
Group home or supervised residence	14.1% (155)
Motel or hotel	9% (99)
Jail or prison	2.4% (27)
Hospital/detox	2.4% (27)
4) 'At-risk of homelessness' refers to those not technically homeless, but whose housing situation is precarious	
Staying in own place	21.8% (241)
Staying with parents	19% (210)
Staying with boyfriend or girlfriend	17.8% (196)

Chronicity

How long have the young people we interviewed been homeless? There are different ways of describing length of time or ‘chronicity’. The most commonly used approach follows Kuhn and Culhane’s typology of chronic, episodic, and transitional homelessness (Kuhn & Culhane, 1998). Here, ‘chronic homelessness’ refers to people who have experienced continuous homelessness for over a year.

Our operating definition comes from the **State of Homelessness in Canada 2014**, which refines the Kuhn-Culhane typology:

TABLE 8

A typology of chronic homelessness

Categories of chronicity	% (NUMBER)
TRANSITIONAL: Individuals and families who generally enter the shelter system for a short stay (less than a month) and usually for one stay only.	46.8% (508)
EPISODIC: This includes individuals who move into and out of homelessness several times over a three-year period (and some of these moves may include residence in corrections or hospital).	21.8% (237)
CHRONIC: Individuals and families who are homeless more than a year and typically include long-term shelter users and unsheltered ‘absolutely homeless’ populations.	31.4% (341)

“Young people on the streets, in care, in SRO [single room occupancy], in transitional housing need more programs to help them, and more workers that are kind, not just rule oriented/book smart. And we need more affordable housing that is part of a clean, safe environment that is pet friendly as well.”

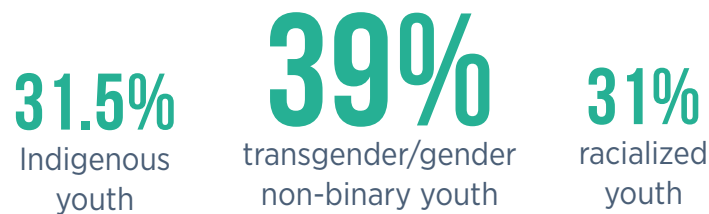
WOMAN, 23

It should be noted that of the chronically homeless population, 60% reported being homeless for three years or more.

60% *of the chronically homeless population reported being homeless for more than 3 years or more*

There are important differences within priority populations. Over 39% of transgender/gender non-binary youth are chronically homeless. Indigenous youth reported higher rates of chronicity (31.5%) than either white youth (29.9%) or other racialized youth (31%). Likewise, those with a history of involvement with child protection services (e.g., foster care, group homes) showed higher rates of chronicity (35.6%) than those who did not (26.9%). Finally, 35.7% of those who left home for the first time before the age of 16 reported being chronically homeless, with 69.3% of that group experiencing homelessness for more than three years.

CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS WITHIN PRIORITY POPULATIONS



The Government of Canada uses a broader definition of chronicity. “Chronically homeless refers to individuals, often with disabling conditions (e.g. chronic physical or mental illness, substance abuse problems), who are currently homeless and have been homeless for six months or more in the past year (i.e., have spent more than 180 cumulative nights in a shelter or place not fit for human habitation)” (Government of Canada, 2014). According to this definition, 37.3% of the participants in our study would be considered chronically homeless.

4.2 Health

A significant body of literature has shown that the experience of homelessness is associated with worsening health and well-being. The adversity of life on the streets means that young people are exposed to a number of factors that lead to poor health, including inadequate nutrition, poor hygiene, lack of proper rest, high levels of stress, increased risk of injury, increased sexual activity with more partners, increased exposure to STIs, and greater exposure to a range of communicable diseases (Boivan et al., 2005; Gaetz et al., 2010; MacKay, 2013; Yonge Street Mission, 2009).

Quality of life and assessment of health

Among our sample, 29.9% rated their quality of life as ‘poor’, while 33.2% said ‘good’ or ‘very good.’ When asked about their current state of health, one third (33.9%) expressed dissatisfaction, while 36.9% said they were satisfied.

Hygiene

Being able to maintain personal hygiene is correlated with better physical health and personal well-being. Past research suggests that youth who experience homelessness have limited access to dental care and have worse oral health (e.g., dental and gum disease). All participants were asked questions related to hygiene and approximately one third indicated they had difficulty maintaining personal hygiene.

TABLE 9

Hygiene

In the past month, how often have you...	DAILY	SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK	ONCE A WEEK OR LESS
Been able to bathe or shower	46.4%	26.5%	27.1%
Been able to brush your teeth	53%	20.3%	26.6%
Been able to put on clean clothes	41.2%	25.4%	33.4%

Nutritional vulnerability

Adolescence is associated with a need for increased nutritional requirements to foster growth and healthy physical and mental development. There is a considerable body of research that demonstrates that young people who experience homelessness are exposed to significant nutritional vulnerability (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2006; Tarasuk et al., 2009a, 2009b; Trarasuk & Dachner, 2013). Tarasuk and her team have shown that young people experiencing homelessness are unlikely to obtain proper nutrition regardless of whether they receive food from charitable services or through the proceeds of their own income generation. Failure to obtain adequate access to food means that young people not only have compromised health, but that their energy levels are lower. As Dachner and Tarasuk (2013) identify, “[c]hronically poor nutrition during adolescence can have negative health impacts over the lifespan and is associated with an increased risk of infections. Poor nutrition can also worsen conditions such as depression, substance abuse and sexually transmitted diseases. Homeless youth face extreme nutritional vulnerability due to chronic food deprivation and poor nutritional quality of food” (p. 1).

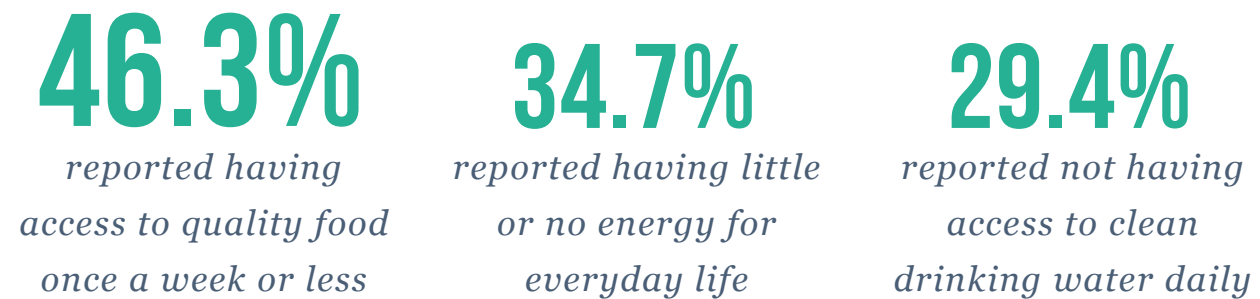
When we asked young people how many times over the past week they had been unable to obtain a well-balanced, nutritious, and filling meal, 38.5% said 1-5 times, 14.5% said 6-10 times, and 15.6% said more than 10 times. We also asked them a range of questions about food:

TABLE 10

Nutritional vulnerability

In the past month, how often have you...	DAILY	SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK	ONCE A WEEK OR LESS
Eaten a good quality, balanced meal when you wanted or needed one	26.8%	26.8%%	46.3%
Accessed clean drinking water	70.6%	15.1%	14.3%
Eaten on a clean surface	50.8%	24.7%	24.6%

While 26.8% of our respondents had access to good quality food when they needed it, almost half (46.3%) experienced this once a week or less. While most youth had access to clean water on a regular basis, it is important to note that almost 30% did not.



Consequently, when asked if they have enough energy for everyday life, one third (34.7%) reported having little or no energy. This finding is important because low energy levels have a significant impact on young people’s ability to work, go to school, carry out healthy relationships, and move forward in their lives.

4.3 Mental Health and Well-Being

Poor mental health is among the most prominent concerns for Canadian homeless youth populations. The challenges people face while homeless have a significantly negative effect on mental health (Gaetz et al., 2010; Kidd, 2013; Van den Bree et al., 2009), and mental health and addictions challenges often lead to homelessness. Generally, there are complex mental health and addictions challenges among this population. This complexity often manifests itself in the form of severity, co-occurring conditions or issues, and exacerbation due to the extreme marginalization that this population experiences. The services available to these youth are seldom adequate, having been designed for stably housed youth populations with natural supports (Slesnick et al., 2009). The result is an underserved population, often experiencing severe and complex forms of mental illness and addictions, whose poor mental health begins to snowball as they confront homelessness. This often leads to further marginalization, unmet needs, and worsening mental health (Karabanow, 2004; Kidd et al., 2016).

The results of the national survey highlight these challenges – pointing to a high degree of unmet service needs and the need for approaches tailored to priority populations.

“I got poor family relations and struggle with anxiety and depression. It has made it almost impossible to apply any constant effort without being sucked back down into anxiety and depression. When I get housing it lasts a few months then people get stupid or life gets to me and the anxiety leads to depression and I am stuck at a standstill again. It is like living in hell dealing with it some days.”

MAN, NO AGE GIVEN

Mental health distress and risk

For our survey we used a well-validated questionnaire that measures mental health symptoms and distress (Dennis et al., 2006). Findings indicated that a total of 85.4% (942) of the youth in our study fell in the ‘high’ symptom/distress category. This is indicative, in the general Canadian population, of youth midway between inpatient and outpatient psychiatric care levels.

Within the sample, 42% of participants reported at least one suicide attempt and 35.2% reported having at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization. These findings fall in line with previous observations of suicide and drug overdose as the leading causes of death among homeless youth in Canada (Roy et al., 2004).

Key associations

Findings showed that the age at which a youth first becomes homeless is associated with particular mental health struggles. Most strikingly, the younger the age of the first homelessness episode, the greater the mental health and addictions symptoms, the poorer the quality of life, and the greater the likelihood of having attempted suicide.

Gender emerged as an important factor related to mental health, with female youth reporting greater physical health concerns and markedly poorer mental health, as well as a higher suicide attempt rate (59% vs. 39% male).

Across all domains, LGBTQ2S youth reported a much greater degree of mental health concerns, including suicide attempts.

85.4%

of youth fell in the 'high' symptom/distress category

42%

reported at least one suicide attempt

35.2%

reported at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization

59%

of female youth attempted suicide

39%

of male youth attempted suicide

A complex picture emerged when analyzing data related to race and ethnicity. Racialized youth struggled with higher mental health symptom levels compared to non-racialized youth, but had a lower suicide attempt rate. Indigenous youth had similar symptom levels but were at greater risk for substance abuse and a history of suicide attempts. Indigenous youth also reported a higher degree of resilience than other youth.

Adversity experienced prior to homelessness, including child protection involvement, physical and sexual abuse, and neglect, was strongly linked with poorer mental health, suicide attempts, a lower quality of life, and negative psychological resilience. Likewise, exposure to physical and sexual violence on the streets had a strong relationship with poorer mental health in all domains.

Social supports were important in relation to mental health. Our findings indicate that better mental health, quality of life, a lower suicide attempt rate, and resilience were related to a supportive connection with at least one family member, the support of peers (though not in the area of substance abuse), and having someone to support them if a crisis arose.

The highest and lowest risk groups

Recognizing that all homeless youth face a great deal of risk, we nonetheless identified youth with the very highest mental health risk and those with the lowest. When looking at difference across demographic groups, we found that a disproportionately high number of LGBTQ2S youth were in the high risk group. Conversely, racialized (non-Indigenous) youth were least likely to present in the high risk group.

We also analyzed the relationship between current levels of risk with experiences that happened prior to becoming homeless. First, we found that exposure to street

“People seeing and recognizing (or helping me recognize) my disabilities and mental health issues and having support with those before attempting to live on my own would have been helpful. More LGBTQ youth housing and youth mental health housing would also be good.”

WOMAN, 17

violence makes the impact of pre-street adversity much less relevant. This suggests that whether prior to becoming homeless young people were exposed to adversity or not, experiencing violence while homeless has a 'leveling' effect on youth mental health risk. Exposure to sexual and physical violence on the street made youth over three times as likely to be in the high mental health risk group. The age of the first homeless episode was also a consistently important factor. The older the youth when they first experience homelessness, the less likely they are to be in the high risk mental health group. Lastly, it was found that social support, while having some benefits, is not likely helpful for those in the highest risk group. This suggests that social support is probably not sufficient to offset the high degree of distress that those youth are facing.

“I have worked and rented different places, always short term, usually renting a room but once I had a bachelor. The places I’ve rented have ended up having mold, bugs, and broken or missing stove/toilet, etc. Since I lost my last job due to mental illness I’ve ended up homeless. I have done some couch surfing and was taken advantage of. I’ve slept on the streets a bit, at bus stops and on benches. I’ve been in and out of different hospitals a lot. Mostly though, I have spent the past seven months living in five different youth shelters. I keep getting discharged because when I have mental health episodes I hurt myself. Also, at every shelter the housing workers there have either refused to help me find independent housing because they said I’m ‘unstable’ or most recently a worker cancelled my housing on me after I’d paid first and last rent. This went against what my psychiatrist wanted.”

WOMAN, 22

4.4 Employment and Financial Security

Young people who are homeless face considerable challenges in obtaining and maintaining employment (Baron & Hartnagel, 2002; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Karabanow, 2010b; O’Grady & Gaetz, 2004; O’Grady et al., 1998; Keenan et al., 2006; Robinson & Baron, 2007). This is not due to a lack of desire for employment or low motivation. Rather, it is a reflection of their social exclusion. Homeless youth’s lack of housing makes it very difficult to establish a routine, provide potential employers with an address on job applications, or establish a space in which to rest and recover from daily stresses. Youth without housing often lack the sufficient food, adequate clothing, and other supports needed to maintain regular employment. Such challenges impede access to employment because they are often competing with other youth who are far better resourced for jobs in an already narrow youth employment sector. Although many youth experiencing homelessness may not be employed in traditional jobs, that does not necessarily mean they are not working. Because homeless youth face considerable barriers to employment, many engage in what are referred to as ‘informal’ economic activities outside of the formal labour market. Some of these jobs are technically legal, for example ‘under the table’ jobs, or ‘binning’ (collecting bottles for refunds). Some youth engage in more risky, illegal, or quasi-legal activities, including the sex trade, panhandling (begging), squeegeeing (cleaning car windshields), and criminal acts such as theft and drug dealing (Gaetz et al., 1999; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; O’Grady et al., 1998; O’Grady & Gaetz, 2004).

In our survey we asked young people about their income generating activities over the previous month.

The following table shows that the main source of income, reported by close to 45% of our sample, was social assistance.

44.6%
*of youth received
money from social
assistance*

Our analysis indicates that money making among youth is socially patterned. To explain, we broke the 14 items in Table 11 into four categories:

- **Employment**
- **Government/NGO Assistance**
- **Money from Friends and/or Family**
- **Subterranean/Illegal Income Generation**

Employment

Among research participants, money making activities were associated with certain characteristics and background experiences. Only 19.7% of youth said they were currently employed, and 22.3% said they earned money in the labour market in the past 30 days, suggesting a rather high unemployment rate. While 13.3% of youth between 15-24 in the general public are unemployed (Statistics Canada, 2015), 75.7% of youth experiencing homelessness are unemployed. Youth from our sample who were employed in the labour market tended most likely to be males, followed by females, and then non-binary youth. In terms of educational levels, not surprisingly, those with the lowest levels of education were least likely to be employed in the labour market.

TABLE 11

Sources of income – past 30 days

In the past 30 days have you

received any money from:	% (NUMBER)
Welfare/Social Assistance	44.6% (492)
Parents/Caregivers/Family	24.9% (275)
Friends	23.8% (262)
Wages or Salary from work	22.3% (246)
Selling Drugs	12.5% (138)
Boy/Girl Friend	11.9% (131)
Panhandling	10.4% (115)
Family or Disability Benefits	10.3% (114)
Theft	9.2% (102)
Personal Needs Allowance from a Shelter	6.5% (72)
Sex Work	3.9% (43)
Breaking and Entering	3.4% (37)
Employment Insurance	1.7% (19)
Squeegeeing	1.1% (12)



TABLE 12

Employment by gender and education level

Gender	%	Education	%
Males	24.6%	< Grade 9	14.3%
Females	19.1%	Some High School	20.3%
Trans/Gender non-binary	15.3%	High School Graduate	28.4%
		Post-Secondary	27.1%

(n = 236; p <.05) (n = 231; p <.01)

State/NGO support

Youth who made money in the last 30 days from Social Assistance, Personal Needs Allowance, Employment Insurance, and/or Disability/Family Benefits were most likely to be youth who reported their gender as being neither male nor female, with males being the least likely to have made money by these sources. Being tested at school for a learning disability was significantly associated with State/NGO assistance, as was the age of the respondent. Findings indicated that the younger a youth was, the less like he/she/they were to make money in this way. Similarly, the older the youth was, the more likely he/she/they were to report State or NGO assistance.

TABLE 13

State/NGO support by gender, age and testing for disability

Gender	%	Age	%	Tested for Learning Disability at School	
					%
Males	53.3%	< 16	39.5%	Yes	53.9%
Females	58.0%	16-17	45.4%	No	38.5%
Trans/Gender non-binary	69.7%	18-20	57.6%		
		21+	61.3%		

(n = 593; p <.05) (n = 604; p <.001) (n = 547; p <.01)

Money from family and friends

Receiving money from family and/or friends was linked to youth’s age, education, age they first left home, and whether they were Indigenous. With respect to education, 48.8% of youth who obtained money from family or friends had less than a grade 9 education. On the other hand, among youth who had some post-secondary education, 33.3% obtained money from inter-personal networks. The age at which a young person left home was strongly related to this income source. Findings indicated that 56% of youth who left home before they were 13 received money from family and friends, compared to 33.3% who left home after they were 20. Two other variables were also linked to this income source: age and Indigenous status. Indigenous youth and young youth were both more likely to obtain money from friends and family than older youth and non-Indigenous youth.

TABLE 14

Money from family and friends by education level, age when first left home, Indigenous status, and age

Education	%	Age First Left Home		Indigenous Status		Age	
			%		%		%
< Grade 9	48.8%	< 13	56.0%	Indigenous	46.5%	< 16	67.4%
Some High School	42.8%	13-15	45.2%	Non-Indigenous	37.3%	17-18	48.1%
High School Graduate	38.5%	16-17	39.4%			19-20	38.5%
Post-Secondary	33.3%	18-20	31.6%			21+	36.8%
		21+	33.3%				

(n = 425; p <.05) (n = 428; p < .001) (n = 443; p <.05) (n = 436; p <.001)



Subterranean and illegal means

The final category of money making that will be examined is money obtained from quasi-legal and illegal means. This type of work is also socially patterned. With respect to gender, males (25.8%) were more likely to make money in the subterranean economy than females (17.3%). This finding comes as no surprise. However, unique to this study was the finding that youth who reported their gender as non-binary (39.4%) were the most likely to be involved in activities such as drug dealing, theft, break an enter, and sex trade involvement and associated sexual exploitation. Educational levels are also strongly linked to involvement in the subterranean economy. Again, not surprisingly, those with lower levels of education are more likely to engage in this kind of income generation than those with higher levels of formal education. The age at which a youth left home was also associated with this form of money making, with younger youth more likely to engage in subterranean money making. Indigenous youth, compared to non-Indigenous youth, were also more likely to report making money through these means. Finally, youth tested for ADHD while they were in school were over represented in this category.

TABLE 15

Income from subterranean and illegal activities by gender, education level, age when first left home, Indigenous status, and testing for ADHD

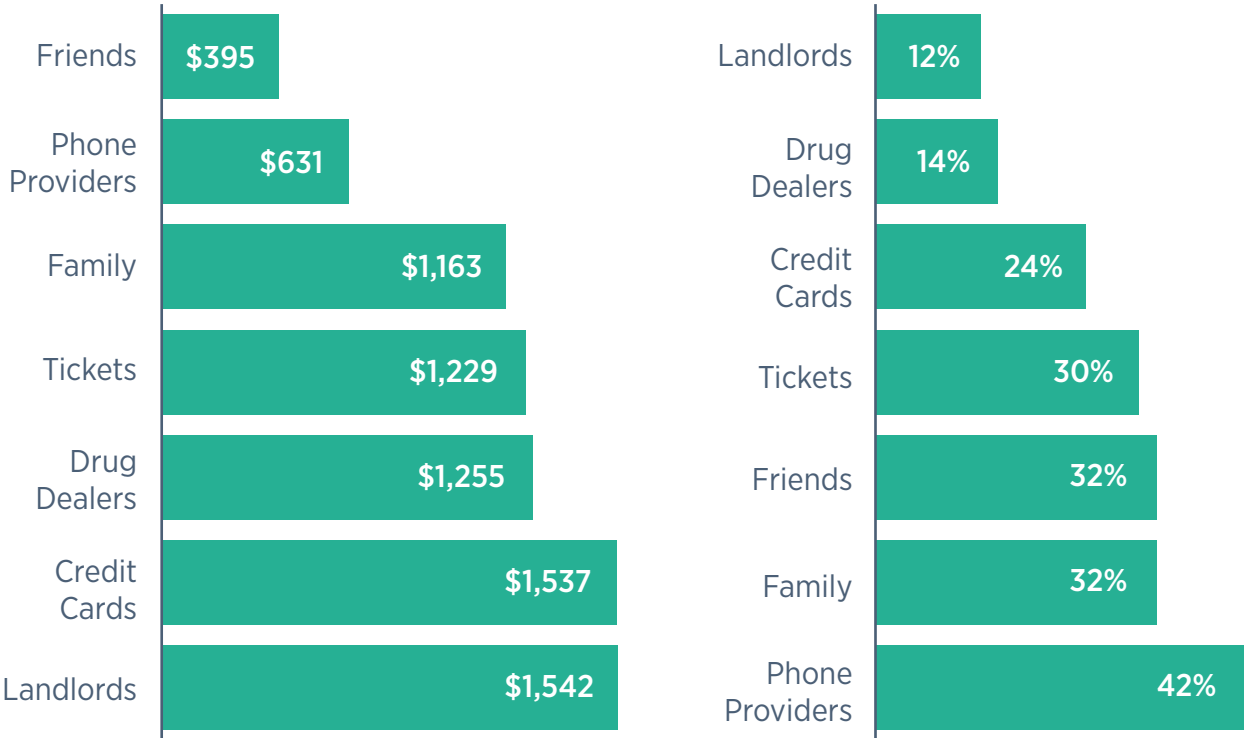
Gender	%	Education	%	Age First Left Home	%	Indigenous Status	%	Tested at School for ADHD	%
Male	25.8%	< Grade 9	41.7%	< 13	36.4%	Indigenous	29.1%	Yes	51.1%
Female	17.3%	Some High School	25.0%	13-15	30.0%	Non-Indigenous	21.2%	No	38.1%
Trans/Gender non-binary	39.4%	High School Graduate	20.7%	16-17	21.4%				
		Post-Secondary	15.5%	18-20	16.7%				
				21+	21.1%				
(n = 252; p <.001)		(n = 250; p <.001)		(n = 254; p <.001)		(n = 261; p <.05)		(n = 251; p <.001)	

Debt load and cheque cashing

Past research has clearly shown that street-involved youth are an incredibly disadvantaged segment of the Canadian population (e.g., they often experience low education, poor nutrition, and high levels of unemployment). In addition, according to the results of this research, many street-involved youth are in debt and about half use payday loan companies. The statistics in Figure 7 explore the level of debt incurred by street youth. Of all the categories shown in the figure, youth most commonly owe money to cell phone providers (42%), followed by debt to family and friends (32%).

FIGURE 7

Debt load: How much money do you owe and to whom?

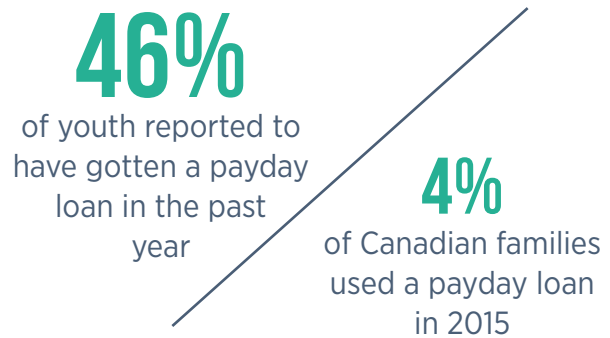


Average amount owed, in Canadian dollars

Payday Loan

When asked how many times they used a payday loan company in the past year, 29% of youth reported between one and five times, and 17% reported over six times. In total, 46% of the sample reported to have gotten a payday loan in the past year. This compares to 4% of Canadian families who used a payday loan in 2015 (Schechter, 2016). Interestingly, there was a positive correlation ($r=.119$, $n=894$, $p<.001$) between the amount of money a young

person owed to family, friends, credit card companies, landlords, drug dealers, tickets from police, and phone companies, and the frequency with which they reported to use the services of payday loan companies. Importantly, we found that those with the most debt were the most likely to use companies such as Money Mart.



4.5 School Participation and Dropping Out

Past research has shown that street-involved youth often have low levels of formal education (Gaetz & O’Grady, 1999). This study confirms this at a national level. In fact, as reported in Section 3.4, 65% of the sample reported not having completed high school and 8% had less than a grade 9 education.

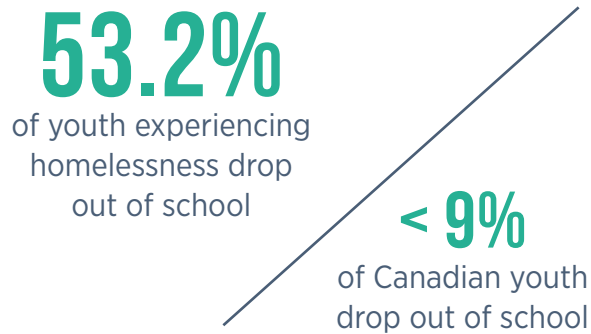
On a positive note, almost half (46.8%) of those who had not completed high school are currently attending school or taking their High School Equivalency Certificate (GED) in spite of being homeless (31.8% of the sample). This means that the actual high school drop out rate is in the range of 53.2%. No statistically significant differences in educational levels were found on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, or ethno-racial identity. However, 57.5% of Indigenous youth and 41.6% of those who left home for the first time before the age of 16 dropped out of high school.

TABLE 16

Current drop out rate

	% (NUMBER)
Currently in high school	31.8% (321)
High school drop out	36.1% (365)
High school graduate – currently in post-secondary	21.0% (218)
High school graduate not attending school	27.2% (275)

Does dropping out of high school point to school disengagement or lack of interest? Importantly, of those who have dropped out of school, 73.9% suggest they would like to



return to school some day, 10.1% said they would not, and 14.4% were unsure at this time. **This may suggest that the experience of homelessness and a lack of supports may be a more significant barrier to returning to school than lack of desire or motivation.**

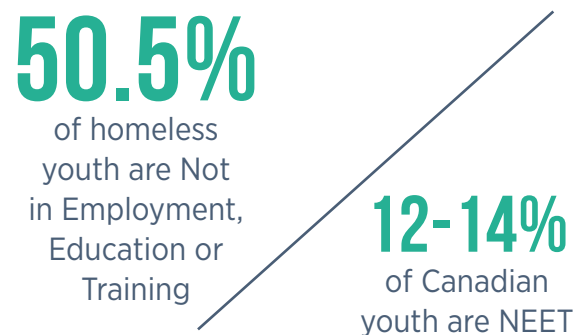
Not in Employment, Education or Training

NEET is a measure to determine the percentage of young people who are not enrolled in employment, education, or training. This group of young people is considered particularly socially excluded and vulnerable. A 2012 study by Statistics Canada found that “The percentage of all Canadian youth age 15 to 29 that are neither in education nor employment (NEET) has ranged between 12% and 14% over the past decade, a rate that is relatively low among the G7 countries” (Marshall, 2012, p. 3).

TABLE 17

Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)

	% (NUMBER)
Employed	8.0% (82)
Employed AND Training/Education	12.0% (123)
Training or Education	29.4% (300)
Not in Employment, Training or Education	50.5% (516)



When using this measure to assess employment, education, and training among our sample, we found a shocking 50.5% of youth participants fit the NEET category. This is more than four times the national average. Results also indicated that approximately 20% of youth participants were employed (of those, over half were employed and enrolled in training and education), and of that group two thirds work 30 hours a week or less. Results indicated that 29.4% were exclusively in training or education.

4.6 Crime

Much research has demonstrated that homeless and street-involved youth are more likely to be involved in street crime than youth in the general population. Because research has shown that youth involved in the drug trade are more likely to be involved in other criminal activities (e.g., theft, breaking and entering, assault), we are using drug selling in our analysis as an indication of crime involvement more broadly (Clinard & Meier, 2016). In order to explore this activity at the national level, we asked youth two questions: “Have you sold drugs in past year?” and “Have you ever sold drugs in your life?”

TABLE 18

Involvement in selling drugs

	YES	NO	MISSING CASES
Ever Sold Drugs?	58%	42%	101
Sold Drug in Past Year?	47.9%	52.1%	609

p <.001

For the purposes of our analysis, we primarily focus on youth’s answers to whether they have ever sold drugs in their lifetime. This analytic focus is chosen because there were significantly higher numbers of participants who didn’t answer whether they had sold drugs in the past year. A total of 609 participants didn’t answer whether they had sold drugs in the past year, while only 101 participants didn’t indicate whether they had ever sold drugs. Though participants were assured of confidentiality, respondents may not have wanted to admit to recently engaging in illegal activity for fear that such an admission could lead to criminal charges. While measuring crime in the past 12 months would have been preferable, we focus on drug selling over the lifetime.

“It’s hard living cheque to cheque. Whether I work or I’m on welfare, I’m still living cheque to cheque with no money until I get the next one. I SELL DRUGS and STEAL when I have to but that doesn’t mean I’m proud to destroy someone’s life or someone’s business.”

MAN, 23

According to our analysis, selling drugs is an activity that is not evenly distributed across our sample. In fact, our data reveals that drug selling is connected to a number of different factors. Before examining these factors, however, let’s look at what drug selling is NOT associated with:

- Child protection involvement (e.g., foster care, group homes)
- Indigenous status (but close p <.10)
- Province of residence
- Being a racialized youth
- Being a new Canadian youth
- Growing up in a family with self-described low socio-economic status (SES)

TABLE 19

Types of drugs sold in past 12 months

Drug	%
Cannabis	43.6%
Cigarettes	24.4%
Cocaine/Crack	19.3%
Ecstasy	13.1%
Crystal Meth	12.9%
OxyContin	8.2%
Heroin	7.8%
LSD	7.6%
Other (e.g., Amphetamines, Dexedrine, Xanax, Fentanyl, Mushrooms, PCP, Ritalin, Ketamine, Percodan)	4.8%

Among youth who sold drugs in the past 12 months, the two most popular drugs sold were cannabis and cigarettes. It is important to note that selling cigarettes in Canada is legal to those who are over the age of 19, and that the recreational use of cannabis may be legalized in Canada in the near future.

In terms of gender, males were most likely to have sold drugs at some point in their life, followed by transgender/gender non-binary youth. Females were the least likely to have sold drugs over their lifetime. Our findings also indicate that those with the lowest levels of schooling were the most likely to have sold drugs in their lifetime, while those reporting the highest educational levels were least likely to report selling drugs. Importantly, the age at which a youth first left home was statistically significant with respect to drug selling. Those who left home when they were young were much more likely to report selling drugs than those who left later in life. For instance, those who first left home before the age of 16 were twice as likely to report drug trade involvement than those who left home when they were 21 or older.

While Indigenous youth were more likely to report selling drugs than non-Indigenous youth, the differences were not statistically significant. However, when we look at the levels of drug selling among Indigenous youth who grew up on reserves versus those who did not, our data shows that those who grew up on reserves are more likely to have sold drugs in their lifetime (73.7% vs. 26.3%). Finally, our findings show that both being tested at school for a learning disability (61%) and being tested for ADHD (39%) are associated with drug dealing.

4.7 Criminal Victimization

The youth in our sample were also asked questions about their experiences as victims of crime. Modeled after the Canadian General Social Survey, we asked questions about violent crime victimization and property crime victimization.

The specific questions we asked were:

PROPERTY CRIME:

During the past 12 months did anyone:

... deliberately damage or destroy any property belonging to you?

... illegally break into or attempt to break into the place where you live?

... steal or try to steal anything else that belonged to you?

VIOLENT CRIME

During the past 12 months:

... did anyone take or try to take something from you by force or threat of force?

... were you attacked by anyone

... did anyone threaten to hit or attack you, or threaten you with a weapon?

... has anyone forced you or attempted to force you into any unwanted sexual activity, by threatening you, holding you down or hurting you in some way?

... has anyone ever touched you against your will in any sexual way?

To assess criminal victimization among these youth, three measures were created. The first, a 'total victimization' measure, calculated how many times a participant indicated they were victimized in any of these eight areas. Scores for this measure could range from 0 to 8. A 'violent crime victimization' measure calculated how many times a participant indicated they were the victim of a violent crime. Scores for this measure could range from 0 to 5. A 'property crime victimization' measure calculated how many times a participant indicated they were the victim of a property crime. Scores for this measure could range from 0 to 3.

Criminal victimization amongst the general population

Data from the 2014 Canadian General Social Survey shows that just under one fifth of Canadians (15 years of age and older) reported being victims of crime on at least one occasion. This is down from just over one quarter in 2004 (Perreault, 2015). The majority of these crimes were non-violent (65%), and the majority of people who were victimized only reported one incident. About four in ten of these victims (37%) reported being victimized on more than one occasion. Common crimes that were reported include: theft of personal property (22%), theft of household property (12%), sexual assault (10%), vandalism (9%), break and enter (7%), theft of motor vehicle or parts (4%), and robbery (3%).

This data indicates that housed Canadians are much more likely to be victims of household property crimes (including automobile-related theft and vandalism) than victims of violent crime. This is important to consider when drawing comparisons between the housed public and homeless youth, most of whom have few possessions and lack their own household or automobile.

TABLE 20

Comparing criminal victimization: homeless youth and the general public

	CANADIAN GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY	STREET YOUTH
Total Crime	19%	68.7%
Violent Crime	7.6%	59.6%
Property Crime	14.3%	57.9%

63%

of homeless youth indicated they had been victimized on more than one occasion over the past year

The percentages in Table 20 clearly show that street-involved youth from across Canada are much more likely to be victims of crime than Canadians in general. Most striking are differences in levels of violent victimization. **Homeless and street-involved youth are almost six times more likely to be victims of violent crime than the general population.** Importantly, among those who reported they were the victim of a crime over the past year, 63% indicated they had been victimized on more than one occasion.

Within our sample, there were no statistically significant differences on these three criminal victimization measures based on gender, race, or status as a racialized or non-racialized youth. However, statistically significant differences were found on the basis of sexual orientation, Indigenous status, and the age at which a youth first left home, with respect to both total victimization and violent victimization. As shown in Table 21, LGBTQ2S youth and Indigenous youth were much more likely to have been victimized than non-minority and non-Indigenous youth. Participants who left home at a younger age were also more likely to report criminal victimization.

TABLE 21

Comparing criminal victimization

	STRAIGHT	LGBTQ2S	NON-INDIGENOUS	INDIGENOUS
Total Crime	64.4%	77.9%***	66.1%	73.7%**
Violent Crime	54.9%	69.6%***	56.6%	64.5%**

** p <.01

*** p <.001

TABLE 22

Criminal victimization based on age first experienced homelessness

	<13	13-15	16-17	18-20	21-24
Total Crime	82.3%	72.8%	66.9%	64.4%	53.6%*
Violent Crime	73.2%	65.6%	57.5%	53.4%	42.9%***
Property Crime	65.3%	63.8%	55.6	56.1%	46.4%***

* p <.01

*** p <.001

When analyzing our data on violent victimization, our findings show statistically significant differences on the basis of gender and sexual orientation for these two questions:

- Has anyone ever touched you against your will in any sexual way?
- Has anyone forced you or attempted to force you into any unwanted sexual activity, by threatening you, holding you down, or hurting you in some way?

TABLE 23

Sexual assault: Gender

In the past year, has anyone:	STRAIGHT	LGBTQ2S	MALE	FEMALE	TRANS/GENDER NON-BINARY
touched you against your will in any sexual way	14.8%	35.6%	8.2%	37.4%	41.3%
forced you or attempted to force you into any unwanted sexual activity, by threatening you, holding you down or hurting you in some way	12.2%	27.8%	7.7%	28.6%	31.1%

p <.001

Female youth, transgender and gender non-binary youth, and LGBTQ2S youth reported the highest levels of sexual violence in our sample. LGBTQ2S youth reported more than twice the amount of sexual violence compared to straight youth, and females and transgender/gender non-binary youth reported levels that were more than four times what males reported.

The age at which a young person leaves home was also a strong predictor of sexual assault, and this was particularly the case with the more serious of the two measures listed in Table 24. Strikingly, 25% of youth who left home when they were under 13 had experienced a forced, unwanted sexual activity compared to zero youth who became homeless after they were 20.

“The road is a hard place to land on. You may think some things only happen in third world countries by you’re wrong, they happen everywhere. Here it is swept under the rug. People refuse to believe that human trafficking and sex slavery happens in Canada but it does and that doesn’t even scratch the surface. I’ve been denied basic human rights, clean water, healthcare and food.”

TRANSWOMAN/TWO-SPIRITED, 21

TABLE 24

Sexual assault: Age first left home

“In the past year, has anyone”:	AGE FIRST LEFT HOME				
	<13	13-15	16-17	18-20	21-24
touched you against your will in any sexual way	28.7%	26.9%	20%	16.8%	10.7%*
forced you or attempted to force you into any unwanted sexual activity, by threatening you, holding you down or hurting you in some way	25%	22.6%	14.2%	14.1%	0**

* p <.05

** p <.01

4.8 Assets: Relationships with Friends and Family, and Self Esteem

In both research and social service provision, there is often more of a focus on risk rather than assets. To really assist any young person, it is important that we understand the range of assets that young people bring to the challenges they face. It is assets that underlie resilience.

Feelings of self-worth and strong relationships with friends and families are important assets and good indicators of well-being. Caring relationships are essential for building resilience and survival on the streets, and can be important personal resources that help young people move out of homelessness. We asked the youth respondents a series of questions about their relationships with friends and family, as well as their feelings of self-worth.

Supports: someone you can count on

We asked respondents whether they had anyone in their life – friend, family member, support worker, or anyone else – they felt they could count on, or who provided them with needed supports.

“I don’t have friends. Not because I don’t want to but because the first to betray you are your family! So who can you trust after that?”

WOMAN, 17

TABLE 25

People you can count on

Do you have someone you can count on to:	DISAGREE (STRONGLY OR SOMEWHAT)	NEITHER DISAGREE NOR AGREE	AGREE (STRONGLY OR SOMEWHAT)
Provide help in an emergency?	21.3% (227)	12.3% (131)	66.4% (708)
Provide you with emotional support?	22.2% (237)	15.9% (170)	61.8% (659)
Check in to see how you are doing?	22.1% (234)	13.8% (146)	64.2% (680)

On a positive note, over 60% of the youth agreed that they did have someone who could help in an emergency, provide emotional support, or check in to see how they were doing. In total, 73% of participants agreed that they had at least one of these types of support.

These supports are important assets. Unfortunately, one in five youth reported they didn't have supports in any one of these three areas.

66.4%
of new Canadians indicated they had at least one type of support

AMONGST POPULATIONS IN THE SAMPLE, THOSE WHO WERE *LEAST LIKELY* TO IDENTIFY SUPPORTS IN AT LEAST ONE AREA INCLUDE:

67.2%

transgender/
gender non-
binary youth

— vs —

74%

cisgender
youth

65%

racialized
youth

71.3%

Indigenous
youth

vs

77.4%

white
youth

71.6%

youth with a history
of child protection
involvement (e.g., foster
care, group homes)

vs

76.4%

youth with no history
of child protection
involvement

Friends

Friends are also important assets. We asked young people nine different questions about friends, trust, and the quality of their relationships. Each question had a five-point scaled response, ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree.’ Participants were asked to rank the following statements on this scale:

- a. *I have friends I’m really close to and trust completely*
- b. *Spending time with my friends is a big part of my life*
- c. *My friends and I talk openly with each other about personal things*
- d. *I spend as much time as I can with my friends*
- e. *I have friends who always take the time to talk over my problems*
- f. *My friends often let me know that they think I’m a worthwhile person*
- g. *When I am with my friends I can relax and be myself*
- h. *No matter what happens I know that my friends will always be there if and when I need them*
- i. *I totally trust my friends*

In analyzing the data, we organized responses in terms of levels of engagement and satisfaction with friends, aggregating the responses to all of the nine statements above:

TABLE 26

Friendship: Level of engagement and quality

Quality of friendship	RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ON FRIENDSHIP	% (NUMBER)
POSITIVE Relations with friends	1. Very engaged (respondents agreed ‘Strongly’ or ‘Somewhat’ with all 9 statements)	23.9% (264)
	2. Engaged (respondents agreed with 5 to 8 statements)	27.3% (301)
MODERATE	3. Moderate	24.3% (268)
NEGATIVE Relations with friends	4. Disengaged (respondents disagreed with 5 to 8 statements)	13.2% (146)
	5. Very disengaged (respondents disagreed ‘Strongly’ or ‘Somewhat’ with all 9 statements)	8.2% (90)

The vast majority of young people surveyed reported having moderate (24.3%) or positive (51.3%) relations with friends. However, 21.4% had negative associations with friends, and

8.2% responded negatively (disagreeing 'somewhat' or 'strongly') to all nine friendship questions.

Importantly, young people who only experienced homelessness once were less likely to report negative associations with friends (16.6%) than youth with multiple episodes of homelessness (32.2%).

Family

It is generally recognized that having positive relationships with family members can be an asset to physical, emotional, and financial well-being. Family conflict is an underlying factor that leads to homelessness for many youth. Moreover, a significant percentage of homeless youth report experiencing physical, sexual, or emotional abuse within their family, with many entering foster care or group homes.

This history of conflict underlies a common myth that when young people leave home, they sever relations with family members and no longer desire or pursue contact. However, this is not necessarily the case.

When asked whether they were currently in regular contact with family (meaning contact with any family member at least once a month), over two thirds (71.6%) said yes, and about one third (28.5%) said no.

For many youth, contact with family was deemed important (63.5%). Across the sample, 86% of those who currently have contact with family identified it as important, and amongst those who do not have contact, 35.2% suggested it was important.

Moving forward, three quarters of the sample (77.3%) would like to improve relationships with some members of their family or guardians. Among the youth surveyed, 49% are actively working on improving relations and 28.3% want to but are not right now. Among participants, 22% indicated they had no interest in improving family relations.

71.6%

of youth surveyed were in contact with a family member at least once per month

77.3%

of youth surveyed would like to improve relationships with family

Self-esteem

Most of us understand the importance of self-esteem. How we feel about ourselves powerfully shapes our lives. Our self-esteem is linked to questions like: Are we competent and determined? Are we able to handle challenging situations? Do we have a sense of self-worth? Do we feel positive about ourselves? How we answer these kinds of questions determines what resources we have to navigate life's challenges, regardless of whether we are housed or homeless.

In our survey, we asked young people a series of questions related to self-esteem with scaled responses, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' Participants were asked to rank the following statements on this scale:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <i>a. I feel proud that I have accomplished things in life</i> | <i>h. On the whole I am satisfied with myself</i> |
| <i>b. I usually take things in stride</i> | <i>i. I feel that I have a number of good qualities</i> |
| <i>c. I feel that I can handle many things at a time</i> | <i>j. I am able to do things as well as most people</i> |
| <i>d. I am determined</i> | <i>k. I feel I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others</i> |
| <i>e. I have self-discipline</i> | <i>l. I take a positive attitude towards myself</i> |
| <i>f. My life has meaning</i> | |
| <i>g. When I'm in a difficult situation, I can usually find my way out of it</i> | |

“I am proud of working right now. And going back to school in the past two years. I got my grade 9-10-11.”

MAN, 25

In analyzing the data, we organized responses in terms of levels of self-esteem, aggregating the responses to all of the 12 statements above:

TABLE 27

Self-esteem

Levels of self-esteem	RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ON SELF-ESTEEM	% (NUMBER)
POSITIVE self-esteem	1. Very positive levels of self-esteem (respondents agreed 'Strongly' or 'Somewhat' with all 12 statements)	13.4% (140)
	2. Positive levels of self-esteem (respondents agreed with 7 to 11 statements)	36.4% (381)
MODERATE	3. Moderate levels of self-esteem	35.7% (374)
LOW LEVELS of self-esteem	4. Low levels of self-esteem (respondents disagreed with 7 to 11 statements)	11.1% (116)
	5. Very low levels of self-esteem (respondents disagreed 'Strongly' or 'Somewhat' with all 12 statements)	3.3% (35)

49.9% *of youth surveyed had positive levels of self-esteem*

Importantly, half of the young people surveyed (49.9%) had positive levels of self-esteem, and 13.4% had very high levels of self-esteem. A much smaller percentage reported low levels of self-esteem (14.3%). Males were more likely to report positive self-esteem (52.7%) than females (48%) or transgender/gender non-binary youth (41%). Likewise gender non-binary and sexual minority youth were more likely to have high levels of self-esteem (52.2%) than LGBTQ2S youth.

A history of housing instability is also an important factor. Young people who only experienced homelessness once had higher levels of self-esteem. Relatedly, young people with a history of housing instability were much less likely to report positive self-esteem (57.6%) compared to those who have been homeless more than once (48.8%) and especially those with five or more experiences (45.2%).

Positive relationships and self-esteem

The quality of relationships with other people is correlated with self-esteem. In our sample, young people who reported positive relationships with friends were much more likely to report high levels of self-esteem. Likewise, those who either are in regular contact with family members (more than once a month) and who value family connections also demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem.

TABLE 28

Quality of relationships and self-esteem

Self-esteem	RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS			RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY			
	POOR RELATIONS WITH FRIENDS	MODERATE RELATIONS WITH FRIENDS	POSITIVE RELATIONS WITH FRIENDS	IN REGULAR CONTACT WITH FAMILY		VALUE FAMILY CONNECTIONS	
				YES	NO	YES	NO
LOW	25.6%	12.5%	10.2%	12.2%	19.2%	11.6%	20.9%
MODERATE	39.6%	48.0%	28.5%	35.1%	37.5%	35.9%	37.3%
POSITIVE	34.4%	39.5%	61.3%	52.7%	43.0%	52.6%	41.4%

Trauma and self-esteem

Research has demonstrated that the experience of trauma is associated with lower levels of self-esteem. Our research confirms this finding. Our data indicates that young people who were victims of physical or sexual assault as children were less likely to have positive self-esteem. This was also the case for young people who were physically or sexually assaulted in the previous 12 months.

TABLE 29

Trauma and self-esteem

Self-esteem	PAST EXPERIENCES OF TRAUMA											
	PHYSICAL ABUSE IN CHILDHOOD				SEXUAL ABUSE IN CHILDHOOD		ASSAULTED IN PAST 12 MONTHS		SEXUAL ASSAULT IN PAST 12 MONTHS		ATTEMPTED SUICIDE	
	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO		
LOW	17.7%	10.3%	18.8%	12.2%	17.4%	11.8%	20.2%	13.0%	18.8%	9.3%		
MODERATE	33.5%	35.3%	38.4%	33.6%	36.5%	34.3%	37.0%	34.2%	38.9%	29.7%		
POSITIVE	48.7%	54.5%	42.9%	54.1%	45.8%	53.9%	42.8%	52.7%	42.2%	60.8%		

“I NEVER QUIT. I moved forward thinking that it doesn’t end here with my problems but at the happiness that I could have if I succeed to confront life consciously while knowing that you can achieve anything if you really want to. You have to see your potential, reflect on all those hardships and how you overcame them. It will make you proud and boost your self-esteem because fuck, I succeeded, thank you.”

MAN, 21

The background of the page is a photograph of a pair of white sneakers with white laces, resting on a light-colored wooden surface. A large, semi-transparent maroon speech bubble graphic is positioned in the upper center of the image, partially overlapping the sneakers. The text is located in the lower-left quadrant of the page.

SECTION 5:
**DISCUSSION:
IMPLICATIONS FOR
POLICY & PRACTICE**

THE *WITHOUT A HOME* STUDY IS THE FIRST PAN-CANADIAN STUDY OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS.

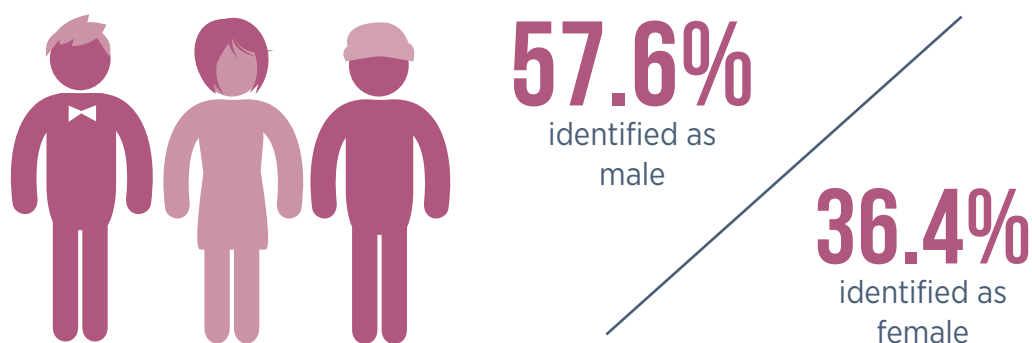
Respondents came from 47 different communities across 10 provinces and territories.

Our sample size of 1,103 was large enough for us to conduct detailed analyses of the results, and to draw important conclusions. The survey now provides policy makers, service providers, researchers, and the general public with some important baseline information about youth homelessness in Canada.

In the discussion, we explore the implications of this research for policy and practice. Given that 6,000-7,000 young people are homeless on any given night in Canada, the time for action is now. The data contained in this report have some crucial implications for how we can move forward to address this problem.

5.1 Priority Populations: Taking Account of Diversity

Our study reveals that the youth homeless population in Canada is quite diverse. With respect to gender, there are more males (57.6%) than females (36.4%). Importantly, for the first time in Canada, we have identified the degree to which transgender (1.8%), gender non-binary (2.5%), and two-spirit youth (1.8%) are overrepresented in this population. Strikingly, LGBTQ2S youth make up almost a third of the sample in our study.



29.5%

*identified as
LGBTQ2S*

1.8%

*identified as
transgender*

2.5%

*identified as
gender non-binary*

1.8%

*identified as
two-spirit*

While it is important that we provide services tailored to the gendered needs of young men and women who are homeless, it is absolutely imperative that we consider our responsibility to address the needs and safety of gender and sexual minorities. Homophobia and transphobia are key drivers of youth homelessness.

We need to develop and implement solutions that attend to the needs of gender and sexual minority youth, but also ensure that the system as a whole does not replicate or amplify the homophobia and transphobia that young people experience leading up to their homelessness. Organizations working with young people must address these issues from a policy, practice, and training perspective. Failure to do so means that services and institutions become part of the problem. A good resource to support this work is the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness' **LGBTQ2S Toolkit**.

30.6%

identified as Indigenous

— vs —

28.2%

identified as members of racialized communities

———— vs —————

4.3%

of the Canadian population is Indigenous

19.1%

of the Canadian population identifies as members of racialized communities

10.1%

were born outside of Canada

Members of racialized communities are also overrepresented among homeless youth in Canada (28.2% compared to the Canadian average of 19.1%). Similarly, newcomer youth make up 10.1% of the sample. Consistent with other recent research (ESDC, 2016), Indigenous youth are extremely overrepresented, making up only 4.3% of the Canadian population but 30.6% of the youth homeless population. More focused attention needs to be in place to support Indigenous youth and address the unique drivers of homelessness for this group. We cannot talk about addressing youth homelessness in Canada without addressing the needs of Indigenous youth.

Colonialism, intergenerational trauma, poverty, violence (against Indigenous women and girls, in particular), poor access to education, overrepresentation in child protection and prison populations, as well as ongoing racism and discrimination, undermine the health and well-being of Indigenous youth. Importantly, all of these factors cumulatively enhance the risk of homelessness for Indigenous youth. Between 2006 and 2011, the Indigenous population increased by over 20% (compared with 5.2% for the non-Indigenous population) (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014). This also means that the Indigenous population is very youthful; eventually these children and youth will require their own housing. We need to take action now to ensure that these Indigenous children and youth do not face the severe challenges to housing that their parents do.

Moving forward, it is imperative that there be focused efforts to meet the needs of Indigenous youth and their families, and that strategies be Indigenous-led.

5.2 The Need to Shift from a Crisis Response to Prevention

This report clearly demonstrates that with respect to youth homelessness, we are waiting much too long to intervene. In many jurisdictions, services for young people who experience homelessness are not available until they are 16 or even 18. The evidence presented here suggests that by that time a lot of damage has already occurred.

First experience of homelessness

A big concern raised by our data is that for many young people, their first experience of homelessness occurs well before they are even entitled to access interventions and supports (outside of child protection). Among study participants, the average age that youth first left home was 15.7. Strikingly, 40.1% of the total sample reported that they were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness. Our study also found that transgender

15.7

*average age participants
first left home*

40.1%

*were younger than
16 when they first
experienced homelessness*

and LGBTQ2S youth were more likely to leave home at an early age. Both of these groups are much more likely to report parental conflict and childhood physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse as contributing factors to their homelessness.

Importantly, the age at which a youth first leaves home shapes the experiences they are likely to have once homeless. **Those who first leave home at an early age are more likely to:**

- Experience multiple episodes of homelessness
- Be involved with child protection services
- Be tested for ADHD
- Experience bullying
- Be victims of crime once homeless, including sexual assault
- Have greater mental health and addictions symptoms
- Experience poorer quality of life
- Attempt suicide
- Become chronically homeless

Our findings show that this group not only experiences severe hardship prior to becoming homeless, but that they are likely to experience greater adversity than other homeless youth once they are on the streets. It is very likely that some adults in their lives – neighbours, teachers, coaches, instructors, or relatives – knew something was wrong but perhaps didn't know what to do.

Housing instability

One of the most striking findings of this report is the high degree of housing instability experienced by young people prior to their current homelessness. In fact, only 24.1% reported they had been homeless once, meaning that 75.9% had experienced multiple episodes. Amongst those who had multiple experiences of homelessness, 63% had between two and five experiences, and more than one third (36.9%) had more than five experiences.³



3. These figures were calculated including only those who gave a numerical estimate of the number of times they were homeless. Those who said “multiple times but not sure how many” were not included.

Our findings indicate that those who left home for the first time before they were 16 were much more likely to experience multiple episodes of homelessness, with just 13.7% reporting only one experience of homelessness.

Of those with multiple experiences (86.7%), a shocking 50% (49.8%) reported five or more episodes.⁴ Other priority populations reporting higher rates of multiple experiences included transgender and gender non-binary youth (82.8%), LGBTQ2S youth (80.2%), and Indigenous youth (80.4%), while newcomer youth were less likely to report multiple experiences (64.3%).

For youth experiencing high levels of housing instability, their pathways into homelessness were likely characterized by considerable movement between home and couch surfing (staying with friends, family members, or other community members) before they accessed emergency services for homeless youth. Again, there were likely adults in their lives who knew something was wrong but were unsure of what to do. During this time, local community services and supports may have been unavailable, inappropriate, or inadequate.

Involvement in child protection services

A high percentage of young people in our sample (63.1%) experienced childhood trauma and abuse. Within the sample, 51.1% reported experiencing physical abuse as a child or adolescent, 24% reported experiencing sexual abuse, and 47.5% reported experiencing other forms of violence and abuse. Given this, it shouldn't be a surprise that many of the youth in our survey were involved in child protection services. However, it should also be noted that only 63.8% of youth with a history of childhood trauma and abuse were involved in the child protection system.

63.1%
experienced childhood
trauma and abuse

— *however, only* —

63.8%
of youth with a history of
childhood trauma and abuse
were involved in the child
protection system

4. This latter figure includes only those with more than one experience of homelessness.

The high percentage of youth who report involvement in child protection services indicates that the system is not working for many youth. Our findings suggest that the way we organize child protection does not adequately take account of, or prepare young people for, what happens after care. Importantly, some young people in care will be at higher risk than others (e.g., youth with higher levels of trauma, attachment deficits, low levels of educational engagement and achievement, limited natural supports, and low self-esteem). Because most jurisdictions offer limited (not universal) support after young people leave care, either voluntarily or when they ‘age out’, these youth are perhaps at higher risk for homelessness once they leave care. From a prevention perspective, we are missing a key opportunity to prevent many youth from becoming homeless by failing to address these issues in the child protection system.

The case for prevention

While the language of ‘prevention’ is being used in discussions of homelessness in Canada, there is little evidence that we are actually doing much to prevent the problem. A compelling case can be made that we will never really end homelessness unless we shift our focus to stopping the flow into homelessness. This shift to prevention requires the development of a solid framework that provides conceptual clarity and direction.

Given that we know the following:

- **Many young people experience homelessness at a very young age**
- **Many demonstrate high rates of housing instability**
- **Many have a history of involvement in child protection**

We must ask: how and when are we going to address their needs? It is evident that, at one time, these youth had adults in their lives who knew something was wrong and could surmise that without proper supports for these young people (and their families), they potentially faced an uncertain future characterized by disengagement from school, criminal involvement, mental health and addictions challenges, and possibly homelessness. From a policy and practice perspective, the question we need to address is: how do we support young people and their families in these situations? How do we enable the adults who are aware that something is wrong to help young people and their families to get the supports they need?

As suggested above, the current response to homelessness is not structured to meet the needs of such young people. In fact, it appears that our current approach has a significant blind spot when it comes to the needs of these youth. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves:

- By doing little or nothing to support this group of young people, and structuring our system of supports for youth who are 16 or older, are we in fact compounding the problems these young people face?
- By waiting until youth are older before we provide help and supports, are we unintentionally allowing their problems and challenges to deepen?
- Does this approach make the task of helping such young people move out of homelessness and transition to adulthood that much more difficult and challenging?
- Do our ways of thinking about chronicity and who is in 'greatest need' need to be challenged?

Canada can learn from other countries, such as Australia, that it makes more sense to focus on prevention when developing solutions to youth homelessness. There are several key components to this work:

1. Family First – The goal of Family First is to break the cycle of homelessness through the provision of a very focused and client-driven intervention that supports young people at risk of homelessness, and their family. Case management supports are intended to help mediate conflicts, strengthen relationships, and nurture natural supports to help young people move forward with their lives. As a prevention initiative, family reconnection helps young people remain 'in place' in their communities, where they can continue in school and stay connected to natural supports (including friends, family members, teachers, and others). The **Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary** and **Eva's** in Toronto offer some good examples of how this work can be done.

2. Early intervention - Place-based early intervention programs are designed to bring a range of services and supports directly to young people (and their families), so that they remain embedded in their system of natural supports, remain in school, and can move forward in a safe and planned way. Young people are able to access such supports through school, community centres, help lines, and centralized intake. A case management approach that combines many prevention strategies is set in motion. Young people and their

families are offered supports (including mediation if that is what is needed), housing options are explored (including remaining at home, host homes, or living independently), and attention is paid to helping young people stay in school or find work. The Youth Connect program in Australia and **RAFT's Youth Reconnect** program in Niagara Region are good examples.

3. School-community partnerships - Early intervention programs that engage the education system seek to identify young people who are at risk of homelessness, dropping out of school, or other significant and negative life altering circumstances. These programs provide the necessary supports to reduce these risks, strengthen families, and to keep youth in place. Student Success programs need to be made available to young people who are deemed to be at risk of homelessness, beginning in middle school.

A strong school-based prevention approach is typically based on collaboration between schools and local community services. It requires a coordinated and strategic systems approach, and must necessarily engage, include, and mandate action from mainstream systems and departments of government, as well as the homelessness sector. Based on the successful **Geelong Project** from Australia, the **Upstream Project** is being launched in Canada through a partnership between **Raising the Roof, A Way Home Canada, The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness,** and **Push for Change.**

4. Transitional supports for young people leaving care - A central task of any prevention agenda should be preventing youth involved with child protection from becoming homeless. Several communities and jurisdictions in Canada have developed and implemented effective program models and interventions that reduce the risk that young people transitioning from care become homeless. In most of these cases, this involves much more than simply reforming child protection laws or extending care to an older age. Rather, effective strategies involve partnerships between government, child protection services, and those community-based service providers who have solid experience and expertise in working with at risk youth. The challenge is to take such successful interventions to scale to ensure that all young people transitioning from care have some level of ongoing support, including meaningful adults in their life, and help with systems navigation, school engagement, and housing. Several countries in Europe are experimenting with an 'after care guarantee' that ensures all young people brought into State care are provided with ongoing supports until they are 25.

5.3 The Need to Help Young People Make Rapid Exits from Homelessness

Research on youth homelessness has consistently identified that when young people become and remain homeless for an extended period, they experience increasingly negative outcomes in terms of their housing stability, health and well-being, mental health, addictions, and safety. Moreover, life on the streets means that staying in school or maintaining employment are very challenging. The outcome for many young people in this situation is further entrenchment in street life, making it more challenging for them to exit homelessness.

The data from our *Without a Home* study confirm a number of these findings:

- **Ongoing housing instability** – Many young people in our study reported considerable housing instability prior to their current experience of homelessness. For many, this instability continues once they are on the streets. Over half of respondents reported that they had stayed in more than one location the previous month, and 10.2% stayed in more than five places. Lack of housing stability means continuing chaos for youth, undermining their ability to care for themselves, stay in school or work, and access the supports needed to move off the streets.
- **Nutritional vulnerability** – Many young people who are homeless do not get enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs. While 26.8% report having access to good quality food when they need it, almost half (46.3%) experience this once a week or less. One of the consequences of this is that when asked if they have enough energy for everyday life, one third (34.7%) reported that they have little or no energy on a day-to-day basis. This low energy undoubtedly has a significant impact on young people's ability to work, go to school, maintain healthy relationships, and move forward in their lives.
- **Declining mental health** – A very high percentage of respondents (85.4%) reported high symptoms of distress, which would, if they were housed, put them in a range midway between inpatient and outpatient psychiatric care levels. Within our sample, 42% of participants reported at least one suicide attempt and 35.2% reported having at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization. While young people with childhood experiences of trauma and distress often arrive on the streets with serious mental health challenges, prolonged experiences of homelessness greatly increases the risk

of mental health challenges for all youth – regardless of the degree and type of adversity faced before homelessness. For example, young people who have been physically or sexually assaulted while homeless are, over three times as likely to be in the high mental health risk group.

- **Lower rates of school participation** – Prolonged experiences of homelessness undermine young people’s ability to go to school and achieve success. While the drop out rate in Canada now sits below 9%, for homeless youth the rate is 53.2%. Failure to complete high school is connected with lower levels of labour force participation, worse health outcomes, greater use of government benefits, and more involvement with the criminal justice system over the lifetime. The good news is that three quarters of those who have dropped out (73.9%) would like to return to school.
- **Higher unemployment** - Obtaining and maintaining employment is also a challenge when you are homeless. At the time of the survey, the unemployment rate amongst youth in the general population in Canada was 13.3%. Amongst the homeless youth surveyed as part of this study, three quarters (75.7%) were unemployed, and only 19.7% currently had jobs. In looking at the NEET indicator (meaning Not in Employment, Education, or Training), 50.5% of youth study participants fit this category.
- **Greater risk of criminal victimization** – Being homeless puts young people at incredible risk of becoming a victim of crime. While on average 19% of Canadians report being a victim of crime in any given year, 68.7% of our sample had been victims of a crime. Only 7.6% of Canadians report being the victim of a violent crime, compared with 59.6% of homeless youth who report violent victimization, including high rates of sexual assault. Young women (37.4%) and transgender/gender non-binary youth (41.3%) reported higher levels of sexual assault in the past year. Such experiences can induce trauma that impairs young people’s ability to move forward with their lives.
- **High levels of chronicity** - The term ‘chronicity’ is used to describe the length and enduring nature of homelessness. Almost one third of the young people surveyed (31.4%) were chronically homeless, meaning they were continuously homeless for more than one year, and 21.8% were episodically homeless, reporting multiple experiences of homelessness over the past three years. Of those who are identified as chronically homeless, 60% reported being homeless for three years or more.

The consequences and outcomes of becoming chronically homeless are all too evident, based on these indicators. The high levels of chronicity identified in this study clearly suggest that not enough is being done to move young people out of homelessness as rapidly as possible.

This data provides clear implications for policy and practice. It is clear that our efforts need to shift from a prolonged crisis response to ensuring that each young person's experience of homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

“A big change for us in the way we work with young people came when we began to ask, ‘How can we make this experience of homelessness their last?’”

KIM WIRTH, BOYS AND GIRLS
CLUBS OF CALGARY

Housing First for Youth (HF4Y)

Effective models to address these complex challenges exist. Perhaps the most effective approach is to broadly employ Housing First for Youth. As an adaptation of the successful Housing First model, the **Framework for Housing First for Youth** was developed in Canada in 2014 as a key strategy and intervention for young people who have already experienced homelessness. It means taking the established Housing First model and adapting it to meet the needs of developing adolescents and young adults. As a program intervention, it means moving youth out of homelessness as quickly as possible with no preconditions. Young people are provided with a range of housing options, including returning home (with supports), supportive housing, transitional housing (including evidence-based models such as the Foyer), and scattered site independent living. Key to this approach is that young people are provided with a range of supports designed for youth that will help them maintain housing, learn life skills, have positive relationships with peers and adults, and re-engage with school, employment training, and/or employment. HF4Y is a form of youth homelessness prevention because it is designed to reduce the risk that young people will ever experience homelessness again.

Shifting to the prevention of youth homelessness through HF4Y means giving young people who are at risk of homelessness, or who have experienced homelessness, the same opportunities as any other young person. It means providing the wrap-around supports that would help any young person make a successful transition to adulthood. It means

helping youth stay in or complete school, get the employment training and experience they need, participate in the labour force, and ultimately achieve greater success and well-being as adults.

If we really want better outcomes for young people, we cannot let them become mired in homelessness. The homeless young people of today potentially become the chronically homeless adults of tomorrow.

5.4 The Importance of Targeted Plans Focused on Systems Integration

The evidence from *Without a Home* makes clear that the longer we allow young people to remain homeless, the worse their problems become and the greater the challenges they face in trying to move off the streets. While a crisis response will always be important and necessary, it cannot be the end game.

Any effective strategy to preventing and ending youth homelessness must take an integrated systems approach. Our research findings reiterate the fact that the drivers of youth homelessness include family breakdown, interpersonal violence, housing instability, mental health and addictions issues, and problematic transitions from government institutions such as child protection. Once homeless, housing instability continues, health, mental health, and addictions worsen, and young people are increasingly exposed to trauma-inducing criminal victimization. A major result of prolonged homelessness is that young people become entrenched in street life and disengage from education and employment. The causes and conditions of youth homelessness therefore touch on many key institutions in society, from health care, to education, child protection, justice, and employment supports, all in addition to housing. To make headway on the challenge of helping young people exit the streets in the most healthy and sustained way, we need to move beyond our expectation that the homelessness sector can solve this issue on its own.

Community planning

A comprehensive community plan to prevent and end youth homelessness is one that is *inclusive* in its process, *strategic* in its objectives, sets real and measurable *targets for change*, is *clear* to all stakeholders, and leads to *real changes* in young people's lives. The most effective method is to use a 'collective impact' approach that engages community leaders,

service providers (mainstream as well as homeless-serving organizations), institutions (e.g., health care, justice), different orders of government, funders, the non-profit and private sectors, and people affected by homelessness. This collective impact approach can support a local integrated systems response.

As opposed to a fragmented collection of services, an integrated systems response requires that programs, services, and service delivery systems are organized at every level – from policy, to intake, to service provision, to client flow – based on the needs of the young person. Many communities in Canada have engaged in community planning around youth homelessness. A Way Home Canada provides leadership and supports in this area, and has developed a comprehensive **Community Planning Toolkit** to support this work.

Planning by higher orders of government

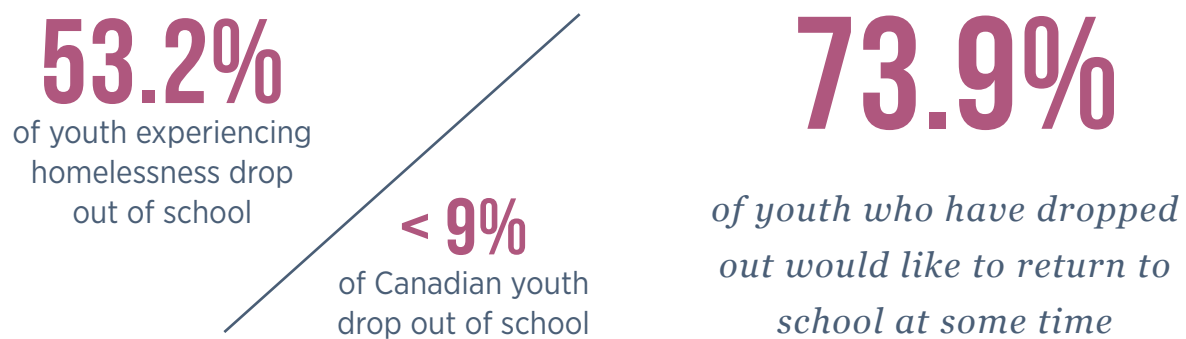
Youth homelessness is inherently a fusion policy issue, and the evidence in this report supports this. This means that to address youth homelessness, federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments must take an integrated systems approach from within government. In other words, youth homelessness cannot be tackled by a single ministry or department. It must involve different parts of government responsible for housing, healthcare (including mental health and addictions), children and family services, social services, municipal affairs, education, employment and training, and justice. Higher orders of government should develop and implement targeted plans to prevent and end youth homelessness, and prioritize systems integration (in Canada, only Alberta and Ontario are making progress in this area). Key to this process is striking inter-ministerial/departmental roundtables, with clear mandates and senior leadership, to address the issue and support implementation.

5.5 Addressing Education and Employment

Very few Canadians would dispute the value of a good education. The drop out rate in Canada now stands at less than 9%, and has declined steadily since the 1950s. Contributing to this is the rise of credentialism and key changes in the labour market, with fewer full-time living wage jobs. This means that more and more young people are completing high school and continuing to post-secondary education.

Not only does educational achievement contribute to better labour market participation, but engagement in school is associated with less dependence on government benefits, lower involvement in crime over the lifetime, and better outcomes in the areas of health and well-being. A growing body of literature has shown that youth who drop out of high school face a considerable disadvantage in the labour market and may face exposure to a life of poverty (Statistics Canada, 2010; 2012b; 2012c; Sum et al., 2009).

Given the very high levels of high school completion in Canada, the very high drop out rate amongst the young people we surveyed is concerning. While it is positive that 46.8% of those who have not completed high school are still in school despite their homelessness, this means that over half (53.2%) have dropped out. This is not a result of their lack of desire or motivation, as 73.9% of those who have dropped out would like to return to school at some time.



Importantly, our research also revealed that a high percentage of homeless youth report being tested for a learning disability (50%) or ADHD (41%). Such learning disabilities are amongst the most significant factors contributing to school disengagement by those who have dropped out.

83%
*reported they had
experienced bullying
at school*

Finally, bullying in school was a common experience for the young people we interviewed. Among study participants, 46% said they were bullied a lot, and 37% said it happened sometimes. Only 17% reported no experience of bullying.

The implications of this research for policy and practice are clear. More must be done to help young people who experience homelessness to reengage in school and achieve success. This includes ensuring that necessary supports are in place for the young people who are marginalized because of learning disabilities or bullying. A key strategy should be ensuring that programmatic supports are in place for young people while they are homeless, as well as within programs that help youth exit homelessness, such as Housing First for Youth. If we want positive, long-term benefits for young people who have experienced homelessness, we have to help them get back into and succeed in school.

5.6 The Need to Support Youth with Mental Health Challenges

It is well established that mental health and addictions can be pathways into homelessness. At the same time, the challenges that accompany life on the streets often worsen pre-existing mental health struggles. Our survey results confirm this. A high percentage of the youth surveyed (85.4%) fell in the ‘high’ symptom/distress category, meaning they require considerable mental health supports. Moreover, 42% of participants reported at least one suicide attempt and 35.2% reported having at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization.

Length of time on the streets also exacerbates the situation. Young people who experience forms of adversity prior to becoming homeless, such as child protection involvement, physical and sexual abuse, and neglect, were more likely to experience poorer mental health, suicide attempts, a lower quality of life, and negative psychological resilience. Likewise, exposure to physical and sexual violence once on the streets negatively impacted mental health for these youth.

85.4%

of youth fell in the ‘high’ symptom/distress category

42%

reported at least one suicide attempt

35.2%

reported at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization

While these findings present clear evidence regarding the need for better access to relevant, effective mental health and addictions interventions broadly, there are several specific implications:

- LGBTQ2S youth are at particularly high risk and have unique needs as a function of sexual and gender identity considerations and the systematic discrimination they face.
- Female youth are facing greater adversity and need services to meet their unique and greater need levels.
- Different profiles of risk and resilience are present for racialized and Indigenous youth – indicative of the need for culturally relevant interventions that attend to areas of heightened risk and capitalize on areas of greater resource.
- Earlier age of first homeless episode significantly increases mental health risks for youth. This underscores the need for rapid and focused secondary prevention responses.
- The strong connections between mental health risk, child protection involvement, and exposure to violence and neglect prior to becoming homelessness, indicate that these youth often experience extreme adversity *before* they become homeless. These challenges are, by far, better addressed before homelessness occurs and in the contexts in which they occur (e.g., child protection services, schools, community, and family).
- Assessing and bolstering social supports is an important activity. It must not, however, be considered sufficient in and of itself for youth at the highest degree of risk.
- In considering the nature of street adversity, mental health and addictions problems cannot be considered in isolation – they are likely driven extensively by conditions of violence, marginalization, and poverty. Comprehensive approaches that attend to all of these domains are essential if mental health services are not to be wasted and ineffective in the face of the challenges youth face while homeless (Kidd, 2012).

5.7 Building Resilience, Assets, and Opportunities

It is clear from the data gathered in this survey that, as a group, this is a population that faces severe adversity in virtually all major life domains. Evidence of this struggle appears in most areas of life, including housing, employment, and education. Challenges in these areas are often accompanied by routine exposure to violence, severe marginalization, and poor mental health. Indeed, our analysis of resilience among these young people suggests that they are often left feeling hopeless and helpless, with little faith in themselves and others to resolve their situation.

It is, however, very important that the story not end here. While homeless youth do have an array of distinct challenges and needs, they also have unique and remarkable resources that persist despite the adversity they face. It is also notable that a high percentage of the youth surveyed have high levels of self-esteem.

There are many strategies we can use to build resilience, assets, and opportunities for these youth. First, there are opportunities to tailor services to specific groups in ways that will enhance impacts and better focus resources. Young women, sexual and gender minority groups, racialized and Indigenous youth all have unique challenges and unique strengths. Tailored approaches might include connecting youth with LGBTQ2S-positive communities and spaces, or providing culturally relevant approaches for Indigenous youth. Additionally, these are youth who typically cycle in and out of homelessness, schools, and work. Each one of these cycles is an opportunity to put prevention strategies in place and build assets. If implemented with care, these prevention strategies can stabilize the gains made and mitigate risks (e.g., through supported housing and employment services, or through jail diversion, for instance).

The majority of youth surveyed have worked and want to work. Similarly, many youth want to go back to school, and some study participants were still engaged in school despite being homeless.

This suggests a clear opportunity to build on personal assets and by providing young people with housing and necessary supports, we can enhance access to education and employment.

Finally, to build assets and resilience, we need to address violence and exploitation. For most of these young people, their lives have been characterized by exposure to violence – in their homes, in their schools, in facilities or institutions, and on the streets. Every such exposure erodes opportunities for these youth to develop in healthy ways and fosters paths towards chronic homelessness, mental illness, and early death. This undermines the building of assets and resilience.

5.8 The Importance of Fortifying Natural Supports

Positive relations with family, friends, neighbours, co-workers (and in the case of youth – meaningful adults) are all assets that help young people move into adulthood in a healthy way. These are considered ‘natural supports’, and for young people who experience homelessness, these connections can be instrumental in helping young people survive on the streets, and eventually move out of homelessness. Housing stability after homelessness is enhanced with strong natural systems of support.

In spite of the multiple forms of victimization and marginality experienced by these youth – including, for many, histories of family conflict, physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse – most young people we surveyed were able to successfully sustain a positive relationship with at least one family member and develop supportive relationships with other youth and adults while homeless.

Friends

Over three quarters of the young people in this survey generally had moderate (27.3%) to positive (51.2%) relations with friends. While for these young people friendships are positive assets as they go forward, it is worth pointing out that 21.4% had negative associations with friends, and 8.2% reported highly negative experiences of friendship.

78.5%
indicated they had moderate to positive relations with friends

Reconnecting with family

While family conflict is an underlying factor that contributes to young people becoming homeless, this does not mean that once on the streets young people generally sever relations with family or have no desire to reconnect. When asked whether they were currently in regular contact with family (meaning contact with any family member at least once a month), over two thirds (71.6%) said yes, and about one third (28.5%) said no. A high percentage of those surveyed suggested that connections with family were important (63.5%). Three quarters of the sample (77.3%) would like to improve relationships with some members of their family or guardians. In fact, 49% are actively working on improving relations, and 28.3% want to but are not right now.

It is only in recent years that those working with young people experiencing homelessness have begun to see the value in helping young people reconnect with family. This is because family has often been framed as the ‘problem’ as so many youth are fleeing family conflict and abuse.

Supporting young people and their families through family reconnection, mediation, or broader ‘family first’ strategies is a positive way both to prevent and intervene early in homelessness, as well as help young people who are exiting the streets to sustainably maintain housing and avoid future homelessness.

Underlying family reconnection and ‘family first’ approaches is the belief that family is important to almost everyone. A truly effective response to youth homelessness “must consider the role that family – and the potential of reconciling damaged relationships – can play in helping street youth move forward with their lives” (Winland et al., 2011, p. 4).

71.6%

*of youth surveyed were
in contact with a family
member at least once
per month*

77.3%

*of youth surveyed
would like to improve
relationships with
family*

Reconnecting with social supports also has implications for mental health and well-being. While social support alone is likely not sufficient to meet the needs of youth facing the greatest degrees of mental health and addictions challenges, such support may play an important role in mitigating risk and distress. Social support can be used as a point of intervention for youth. For example, family interventions, when done thoughtfully, have been found to reduce addictions (Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2009). However, social support from other homeless youth can often represent a challenge – particularly in navigating pathways out of homelessness when such supports often have to be reconsidered and severed at times for the youth to move forward (Kidd et al., 2016). There is still work to be done to determine how youth can be best helped in efforts to optimize their support networks while homeless, and develop relationships that support them out of homelessness and into roles and activities in the broader community.

5.9 Supporting Youth Voice

Youth experiencing homelessness have a lot to contribute to the discussion about what needs to be done to end youth homelessness. They know a lot about how systems have failed them and what supports are necessary. Young people with lived experience should be part of any planning table.

One of the goals of this report has been to give voice to youth. We conclude this section giving the final word to young people who participated in this national survey.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WANT TO SHARE with Canadians about being a young person in your living situation?

“When you see kids’... people we are not scum. Geez, we are human beings, too. You can’t judge a book by its cover and you have no idea what I’ve been through, reason why I’m on the street, now maybe you should just sit down and talk. Then maybe you will realize why I am here today.” MAN, 21

“Homelessness is not what people think. You don’t choose this life, but it is a better one than before.”

WOMAN, 20



“If your child is struggling, don’t throw them out or put down. Fucking support them.” MAN, 17

“The system is not designed for youth. It’s complicated and needs to change.” WOMAN, 17

“I would just really emphasize patience. Be patient with us.”

WOMAN, 19

“All could have been avoided if there was more support. It’s starting now and that’s good. When I aged out I wasn’t told or made aware of any programs.” WOMAN, 20

“Young people need more help than people realize. This world has changed so fast even we can’t keep up and we’re the generation that was expected to be able to.” MAN, 24

“There should be a standard of service available in every province. The system is broken and needs to be fixed. Supports need to be available for the whole family.” MAN, 17

“Not all of us are bad kids. Just made some mistakes and never had a proper family.” MAN, 20

“There has to be more services available. More in school services which would make it easier. Also more longer stay housing.” MAN, 18





SECTION 6:

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PREVENTING AND ENDING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Youth homelessness continues to be a seemingly intractable problem in Canada. We believe there are solutions to youth homelessness, and this means doing things differently.

The results of this research point to one important conclusion: by allowing young people to experience homelessness for any length of time, we are undermining human rights. Lack of access to stable housing, food, education, safety and supports are all identifiable and addressable human rights violations occurring at the both the individual and systemic levels. Human rights must be the primary framework within which we address youth homelessness. A human rights approach clarifies the rationale and objectives surrounding prevention and intervention, and increases the likelihood that responses are not ‘siloed’ within particular domains or delivered in a fragmented and inequitable manner. In other words, while personal assets and resilience are important, we must do much more than focus on individual strengths. It is not possible, nor is it ethical or acceptable, to expect young people to rely *only* on their assets to ‘bootstrap’ themselves out of homelessness. We must begin with the understanding that each and every young person has the right to housing, safety, education, and supports regardless of personal circumstance.

The first national survey on youth homelessness produced some important results that can help contribute to better solutions to homelessness in Canada. Below are the recommendations that emerge from the findings of the *Without a Home* survey.

1. Government of Canada

1.1 The Government of Canada should implement a Youth Homelessness Strategy supported by a targeted investment.

Following the **Policy Brief on Youth Homelessness** developed by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada, the federal Youth Homelessness Strategy should focus on:

- a) Community Planning: Designated communities should be supported to develop and implement plans to prevent and end youth homelessness embedded in systems of care with measurable targets for reducing the problem.
- b) Program interventions focusing specifically on prevention and moving youth out of homelessness as rapidly as possible (through Housing First for Youth, for instance).
- c) Support for Indigenous youth.
- d) Knowledge development and data management support specific to youth homelessness.
- e) Federal/provincial/territorial planning table to support planning and implementation on housing and homelessness, with a focus on youth homelessness.

1.2 The Prime Minister, as the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Youth, should convene an Inter-Ministerial planning and coordination table.

This table will monitor inter-ministerial coordination and report to the Prime Minister on strategy and progress on youth homelessness.

2. Provincial and Territorial Governments

2.1 All provincial and territorial governments should implement targeted strategies to prevent and end youth homelessness as part of their broader homelessness strategies.

Provincial and territorial governments should be key players in addressing youth homelessness, yet currently only two provinces have identified this as a priority (Ontario and Alberta). Youth homelessness is a ‘fusion policy’ issue that touches on many responsibilities of provincial governments, including housing, municipal services, child and family services, education, health, employment, and justice. Provincial plans should focus on:

- a) Supporting community planning processes, including targeted funding for work on youth homelessness.
- b) Adopting the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness’ definition of youth homelessness, which includes youth between the ages of 13-24, and ensuring Ministries work within this framework.
- c) Prioritizing youth homelessness prevention.
- d) Supporting implementation of Housing First for Youth.
- e) Inter-ministerial planning tables to coordinate activities within government and to hold each ministry accountable for its role in preventing and ending youth homelessness.
- f) Conducting a jurisdictional review to ensure provincial legislation and policy does not become a barrier to action on youth homelessness (i.e. age cut offs that deny services and supports to young people based on the assumption they are currently in the care of parents or guardians).
- g) Setting real and measurable targets for the reduction of youth homelessness.

2.2 Focus strategy on supporting young people who are under 16 and are at risk of homelessness.

This means aligning inter-ministerial legislation, policy, and funding to support this work, including:

- a) Changing ministerial, departmental, and program mandates to enable better collaboration to achieve success.
- b) Supporting communities to work with this population.
- c) More supports for families with children under 16.
- d) Identifying inter-ministerial opportunities for collaboration (for instance, between education, child and family services, and health and justice).

2.3 Ensure support of young people who are transitioning from child protection services in a way that ensures housing stability and ongoing support.

This should include:

- a) An ‘after care guarantee’ that provides support until young people are 25.
- b) Support for participation in employment, education, and training that does not make assistance contingent upon participation.
- c) Guaranteed housing support.
- e) Ensuring young people have the support of a meaningful adult in their life as they transition from care.
- e) Portable financial support.
- f) Services provided by those with expertise in working with adolescents and young adults.

2.4 Provincial Ministries of Justice, Corrections, and the Attorney General should address youth homelessness.

This should be achieved through:

- a) Ensuring all young people who exit corrections (either the juvenile or adult systems) have access to housing and supports to facilitate reintegration.
- b) A community safety strategy to reduce the risk of criminal victimization for homeless youth.
- c) Actively supporting the reduction and elimination of legislation and policing practices that criminalize young people who are homeless (including unnecessary ticketing, when young people are not in a position to repay).
- d) Accessible court procedures that allow young people debt forgiveness for ticketing charges in exchange for community service.

2.5 Provincial Ministries of Education should be mandated to support early intervention strategies to prevent youth homelessness.

Schools are key to addressing youth homelessness because every young person who experiences homelessness was once in school, and likely in contact with an adult who knew something was wrong. Schools are the obvious place to focus on youth homelessness prevention. This should be done through mandating school boards to develop and implement strategies to work with community organizations on youth homelessness prevention and early intervention.

2.6 Provincial Ministries of Health should ensure that young people at-risk and their families have adequate supports for mental health and addictions challenges.

Coordination of effective care in this area will include the promotion of strategic partnerships between community service organizations and tertiary facilities, the creation of rapid care access pathways for those at greatest risk, and the promotion of capacity building initiatives from community service direct care levels through to mainstream service domains (e.g., emergency rooms, first responders, etc).

3. Communities and Municipalities

It is at the community level that youth homelessness is most effectively addressed. This is where young people and their families live, and where key institutions deliver services and supports. Below are ten key recommendations for communities and municipalities.

3.1 All communities and/or municipalities should plan and implement strategies to prevent and end youth homelessness.

In order to achieve success, communities should:

- a) Nurture and support local leadership.
- b) Convene a planning table using a ‘collective impact’ approach that includes sector services, mainstream services, and ‘unusual suspects’ (e.g., police, landlords).
- c) Have as a goal that each young person’s experience of homelessness be rare, brief, and non-recurring.
- d) Use data for service integration and monitoring of progress.

3.2 Communities should focus on prevention and strategies to move young people out of homelessness instead of expanding emergency services.

The level of chronic homelessness amongst youth is very high (75% according to the federal definition). The survey results powerfully demonstrate the negative impact of prolonged experiences of homelessness.

3.3 Community strategies should focus on systems integration to facilitate smooth transitions from homelessness and ensure no young person slips through the cracks.

Young people in the survey demonstrated a high degree of housing instability while homeless, and presented with complex needs that require support from a variety of services.

3.4 Community strategies should necessarily ensure that local and program responses take account of the needs of priority populations.

The population of young people experiencing homelessness is incredibly diverse. Moreover, some priority populations have special needs. Finally, some groups experience considerable discrimination, which is not only a contributing factor to their homelessness, but may also continue when they encounter services and systems while they are homeless. This includes LGBTQ2S youth, transgender youth, Indigenous youth and members of racialized communities, for instance.

3.5 Enable all young people who experience homelessness to reengage with education, training and employment.

Graduating high school is one of the greatest predictors of health, wellness, and labour force participation. The very high percentage of young people in our survey who have dropped out of high school and/or are not in employment or training is concerning. Young people need support to reengage with school, to achieve success, and to move on to higher levels of education and training if they desire. This requires housing stability and ongoing supports.

In order to enhance labour force participation, young people need access to training and employment. For those with weak work readiness skills, access to training (including apprenticeships) should be facilitated based on needs. A large number of youth simply need direct access to employment. Sustainable employment is necessarily dependent upon young people having stable housing and ongoing supports.

3.6 Make ‘family reconnect’ supports available to all young people who come into contact with the system.

Young people in the survey identified that family connections were meaningful to them, and the vast majority wanted to improve relationships. Strengthening family relationships boosts natural supports and builds assets for young people.

3.7 Housing First for Youth should be broadly applied as both a community philosophy and as a program intervention.

Housing First is a proven program intervention. The Housing First for Youth framework adapts this program to meet the needs of developing adolescents and young adults. Communities implementing this model should:

- a) Prioritize young people who are chronically homeless with complex needs,
- b) Apply the principles to all young people who experience homelessness, and not wait until things ‘get bad’ before young people are entitled to support, and
- c) Use the model for prevention, to support young people transitioning from care or corrections.

3.8 In working with young people, communities should focus not just on risks, but assets and resilience.

A Positive Youth Development philosophy and practice focuses on both risks and assets. In implementing positive youth development, communities should ensure that:

- a) Staff are supported to do this work.
- b) Case management and assessment tools take account of this approach.
- c) Program outcomes focus on more than housing stability and mitigating risk, but also on building assets and resilience.
- d) Young people are supported to strengthen relationships with other young people and adults.

3.9 Mental health and addictions needs of young people should be prioritized in community planning and service delivery.

The data from this survey demonstrated the extent to which mental health and addictions are clearly an issue for many young people who experience homelessness. The implications for this include:

- a) The need for all service providers to adopt a ‘trauma informed care’ approach and ensure all staff are trained and supported to do this work.
- b) Harm reduction programming and supports should be available to all young people who need it, and all staff should be trained and supported to do this work.
- c) Local and regional health authorities should work with communities to ensure that all young people between 13-24 have access to necessary mental health and addictions supports.
- d) Targeted approaches that are tailored to youth needs, such as rapid prevention responses for newly homeless youth and augmentative supports for youth transitioning out of homelessness.

3.10 Foster meaningful youth engagement in all policy development, planning and implementation processes.

Young people are very knowledgeable about what has led to their current situation, what is ‘working’ and what isn’t, and what they need. Youth should be included in planning in a way that is respectful and meaningful to them. They should also be compensated for their time and efforts.

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