

# WHAT WOULD IT TAKE?

## Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention

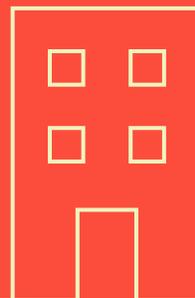
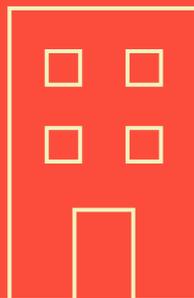
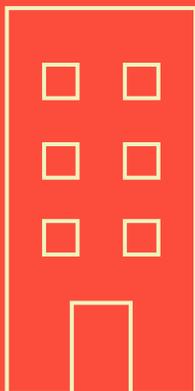
Kaitlin Schwan, Stephen Gaetz, David French,  
Melanie Redman, Jesse Thistle, Erin Dej



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CANADA



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Kaitlin Schwan, Stephen Gaetz, David French, Melanie Redman, Jesse Thistle, Erin Dej

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## COH Research Report #16

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This report draws from the conceptual framing and scholarship of [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention](#) and [Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness](#). The recommendations build upon the recommendations of several policy briefs published by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada. We wish to thank all authors of these documents for their insights, and hope this document will extend the impact of their work.

Finally, we would like to extend our deep thanks to the COH and AWH team members who made this research possible: Allyson Marsolais, Jesse Donaldson, Amanda Buchnea, Lesley McMillan, Steph Vasko, Dylan Ostetto, Niveen Saleh, Julienne Bay, Riana Fisher, Malaika Taylor, and Mike Bulthuis.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Are we making significant headway on youth homelessness in Canada?**

**Are we stopping young people from becoming homeless?**

**Are we ensuring that young people transition out of homelessness quickly, and do not become homeless again?**

It is time that we started taking a good, hard look at these questions. In our efforts to end youth homelessness, we have primarily focused on providing emergency services and supports to young people while they are homeless. Unfortunately, this hasn't gotten us the results we want. Youth homelessness in Canada is an ongoing problem for which we seem to be making slow but insufficient progress. It is time to consider a new approach – *the prevention of youth homelessness*.

The *What Would it Take?* study asked young people with lived experience of homelessness: what would it take to prevent youth homelessness in Canada? Between July 2017 and January 2018, [A Way Home Canada](#) and the [Canadian Observatory on Homelessness](#) consulted with youth across Canada to ask:

- What would have prevented your homelessness?
- What programs, policies, services, and supports are needed to prevent youth homelessness?
- What do you want to tell the Canadian government about preventing youth homelessness?
- How do you want to be involved in making change on this issue?

The purpose of this report is to amplify the voices, insights, and wisdom of these young people in order to drive policy and practice change.

**12**

*communities*

**17**

*focus groups*

**7**

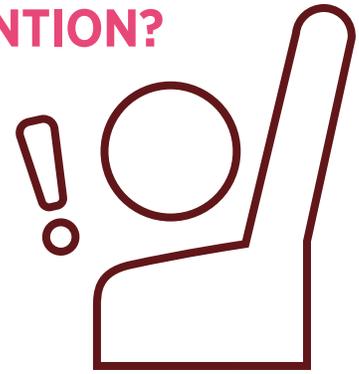
*provinces & territories*

**114**

*youth participants*

# WHAT IS YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION?

**We asked youth across Canada to share their perspectives on youth homelessness prevention. But what is youth homelessness prevention, and what isn't it?**



While preventing homelessness is generally regarded as a good thing, we often have little clarity about what it actually means. To address this confusion, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness released [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention](#) in 2017, defining homelessness prevention as:

“Policies, practices, and interventions that reduce the likelihood that someone will experience homelessness. It also means providing those who have been homeless with the necessary resources and supports to stabilize their housing, enhance integration and social inclusion, and ultimately reduce the risk of the recurrence of homelessness.”

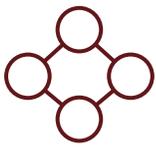
This definition also clarifies what prevention is *not*. Preventing homelessness must involve keeping a person housed, as well as immediately providing housing to anyone experiencing homelessness. While emergency services often provide a range of supports that build resilience, skills, and reduce the most negative impacts of homelessness, interventions that do not directly (or even indirectly) prevent the occurrence or reoccurrence of homelessness cannot be considered prevention. Similarly, interventions such as life skills, addictions supports, or mental health services can only be considered prevention if they are provided in the context of immediate access to housing.

We know that the causes and experiences of homelessness for youth are unique, calling for a distinct approach to youth homelessness prevention. This report helps us understand what youth homelessness prevention should look like from the real experts – young people themselves.

# YOUTH'S PERSPECTIVES ON PREVENTION

## Where should we focus our prevention efforts?

Youth explained that they became homeless as a result of many intersecting factors, such as poverty, family conflict, difficulty transitioning from care, limited availability of services, and landlord discrimination. To best understand these complex factors, and how our prevention efforts can target each one, we use a **social-ecological model**. A social-ecological model positions youth homelessness as the outcome of a complex interplay between three domains: *structural factors*, *systems failures*, and *individual and relational factors* (Gaetz et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2014).



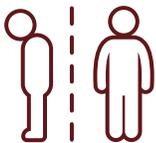
### STRUCTURAL FACTORS

are broad systemic, economic, and societal issues that occur at a societal level that affect opportunities, social environments, and outcomes for individuals.



### SYSTEM FAILURES

refer to situations in which inadequate policy and service delivery within and between systems contribute to the likelihood that someone will experience homelessness. These include barriers to accessing public systems, failed transitions from publicly funded institutions and systems, and silos and gaps both within and between government funded departments and systems, and also within non-profit sectors.



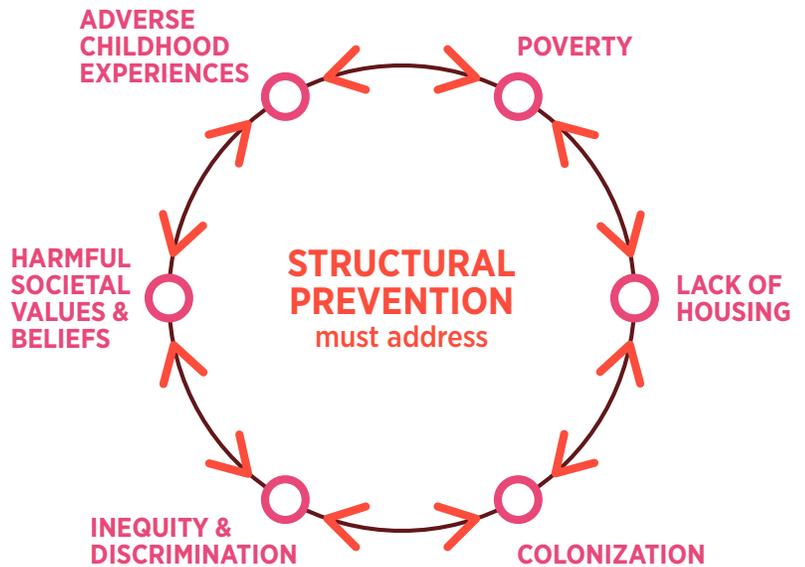
### INDIVIDUAL AND RELATIONAL FACTORS

refer to the personal circumstances that place people at risk of homelessness.

We can use this model to frame youth's perspectives on prevention and where we should target our efforts. Youth explained that to effectively prevent youth homelessness, we must address all factors simultaneously.

# STRUCTURAL PREVENTION

Young people across the country described youth homelessness as rooted in the structures of Canada: the social, political, economic, and societal system and values that underpin our society. Youth felt that reform is needed to address six structural challenges: **poverty, lack of housing, colonization, inequity and discrimination, harmful societal values and beliefs, and adverse childhood experiences.**



## Structural Challenges Faced by Youth

Many youth described childhoods of precarious housing and poverty – experiences they linked to limited affordable housing, insufficient social assistance rates, and tight employment markets. Forced to choose between rent and food, youth’s caregivers were often unable to properly feed or clothe their children. Some youth discussed cycling in and out of family homelessness, trying to hide their poverty from their classmates, and experiencing neglect because their caregivers simply couldn’t make ends meet. Multiple youth discussed going hungry regularly, repairing their clothes during art class, borrowing spare change from friends, or having to use their school’s hot-glue gun to mend their shoes.

*“Education is hard to get because housing is hard to get. What’s easy is being a prostitute and selling drugs.”*

CALGARY YOUTH

For many, adverse childhood experiences of neglect or abuse forced them onto the street at a young age. Once on their own, the severe lack of affordable and safe housing became a significant problem. Youth emphasized the interdependency between housing, employment, and education, explaining how difficult it is to remain in school or employed without a home.

## Several youth described working insecure, minimum wage jobs, sleeping on the street, and falling asleep in class as a way of life.

For many youth, these challenges were made worse by long waitlists for public housing and complex bureaucratic barriers to obtaining social assistance, youth housing, rent subsidies, and other services and supports.

Youth also described inequity and discrimination as part of their everyday lives, occurring in public and private spaces and systems. Youth vividly described experiences of discrimination and stigmatization when applying to rent housing, access income supports, or obtain a job, often on the basis of age, class, race, sexuality, gender, and/or disability.

The racism and inequity faced by Indigenous youth and their communities was a key theme in these discussions.

**Indigenous youth linked their homelessness directly to the intergenerational trauma and poverty caused by colonialism, with one youth in Vancouver explaining, “Colonization, like, if that didn’t happen, I feel like I would be so good.”**

Youth identified the multiple ways racism impacts Indigenous youth, including landlord discrimination, staff or worker racism in the child welfare system, and police practices that target and criminalize Indigenous Peoples. Importantly, youth framed these inequities as human rights violations.

According to young people, structural challenges are mutually reinforcing, often trapping youth in cycles of inequity, marginalization, and homelessness.

**Youth were clear that poverty and housing precarity do not occur in a vacuum, but result from systems designed to create wealth for others, including settlers, housing developers, and large businesses and corporations.**

Youth emphasized that homelessness prevention must involve tackling head-on the wicked problems that have plagued Canada for centuries: income inequality, patriarchy, colonial violence, inequity, and human rights violations. Fortunately, young people across the country offer practical, compelling solutions for implementing the structural change necessary to ensure better outcomes for youth.

## Youth's Proposed Solutions

- Increase social assistance rates and create accessible pathways to quickly obtain social assistance, identity documents, and rent subsidies for youth and their families
- Remove policies that prohibit recipients from saving income or working while receiving social assistance
- Create emergency relief funds for youth and their families experiencing crises or facing eviction
- Protect existing affordable rental housing and regulate housing development and speculation
- Provide housing supports to youth and their families before they become homeless
- Significantly reduce waitlists for public housing
- Build and expand affordable housing for youth and their families, offering a range of housing models to meet the needs of diverse youth
- Do not predicate access to youth housing on mandatory attendance in programs, school, or employment, and reduce the acuity criteria required to access youth housing
- Increase funding for Indigenous supports, services, and community centres, including Friendship Centres
- Develop a youth homelessness prevention strategy specific to Indigenous youth
- Penalize landlords and employers for discrimination and develop accountability mechanisms so landlords and employers cannot continue to harm youth
- Make services, supports, benefits, and entitlements in all systems easier to access for youth with disabilities
- Increase social assistance rates for people with disabilities and chronic health issues

*“To access BC housing or any youth rent subsidies, you have to be homeless for a minimum of six months before they’ll even look at you. Six months is a long time. And there’s no need for any youth to go through that just to get a house. Cause some of them can make it through that time period, but some can’t.”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

## SYSTEMS PREVENTION

When young people were asked what would have prevented their homelessness, many youth traced these experiences back to system failures. Importantly, many youth felt that systems change is where youth homelessness prevention efforts could be most effective. Youth discussed five key systems that need to develop policies, protocols, and practices to better prevent youth homelessness: **Education, Child Welfare, Healthcare and Addictions, the Youth Homelessness Sector, and Criminal Justice.**



## System Failures Faced by Youth

Consultations with youth revealed the impact multiple systems play in their paths into, and out of, homelessness. Most youth traced the origins of their homelessness back to systems failures - inadequate policy and service delivery within public systems. These failures took various forms, including:

- Youth being transitioned out of the child welfare or healthcare system with little income or supports
- Youth under 16 being denied access to mental health or addiction services without parental signatures
- Youth being turned away from services or housing because they were not “homeless enough” to qualify for help (e.g., had not been homeless for more than 3 months)
- Youth being removed from housing, supports, or services when they couldn’t meet the requirement that they participate in education or employment
- Youth struggling to navigate complex and confusing bureaucratic requirements to access services, including difficulties obtaining necessary documents (e.g., reference letters, ID, citizenship documents)

Youth explained that the eligibility criteria in many systems are too high and too stringent, leaving many young people stranded without access to supports or services.

Youth are rarely provided with the practical tools, information, or resources they need to access supports or services. Poor coordination within and between systems (e.g., child welfare and education) amplifies these difficulties, making services hard to navigate. Further, youth reported profound experiences of violence and discrimination within public systems (e.g., abuse and neglect in foster care). Many youth felt they had inadequate knowledge about their human and legal rights in order to address these experiences and other rights violations (e.g., police profiling, landlord discrimination).

Many youth were able to look back on their lives and pinpoint the key moment that the right supports or interventions could have changed their path into homelessness. Many youth reported reaching out for support during those moments – asking a teacher, a social worker, a police officer, a caseworker, or a doctor for help. For too many, however, these interactions failed them.

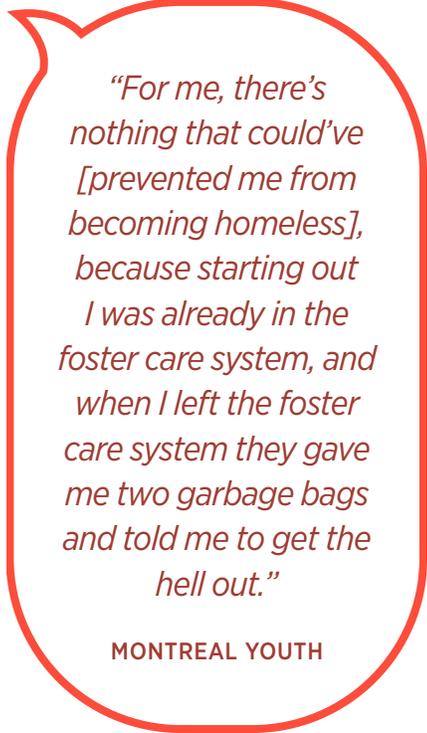
**Youth reported that these professionals frequently ignored or discounted their experiences of abuse, neglect, homelessness, discrimination, or violence. In many cases youth felt further marginalized, traumatized, and isolated because of these interactions.**

In fact, some felt they became homeless as a direct result of professionals' behaviours. In focus groups across the country, we heard:

- Youth were mocked for calling the police when they experienced family violence.
- Youth were silenced when they reported abuse in their foster homes.
- Youth were stigmatized by teachers for their mental health issues.
- Youth were kicked out of services because of their sexuality or gender expression.
- Youth were ignored when they said their home or building was unsafe.

These findings remind us that young people primarily engage with systems through the professionals that work within them. Youth emphasized the importance of ensuring that frontline workers have the tools, training, supports, resources, and workload to support youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, abuse, or neglect.

Many youth felt that system change is where youth homelessness prevention efforts could be most *effective*.



*“For me, there’s nothing that could’ve [prevented me from becoming homeless], because starting out I was already in the foster care system, and when I left the foster care system they gave me two garbage bags and told me to get the hell out.”*

MONTREAL YOUTH

Consultations revealed that many of the personal and interpersonal challenges we identify as risk factors for homelessness – such as family conflict or health crises – only become pathways into homelessness when systems failures occur.

**Youth explained that homelessness could be prevented for many young people if public systems provide access to the right supports when these crises occur.**

## Youth's Proposed Solutions

- Develop regional and community-based plans to prevent and end youth homelessness
- Increase accessibility, affordability, availability, and awareness of services across all systems (e.g., healthcare, the youth homelessness sector)
- Improve coordination and collaboration across services and systems to reduce barriers to accessing supports and services for youth and their families
- Improve training and education for professionals in all systems (e.g., social workers, teachers, doctors, nurses) on how to appropriately identify and respond to young people experiencing abuse, neglect, or homelessness
- Ensure all professionals are trained in anti-oppression, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, empathy, trauma-informed care, and cultural competency
- Educate young people on their legal and human rights, and how to access legal supports if their rights are violated
- Implement school-based mechanisms to screen for, and provide immediate supports to, youth experiencing abuse, neglect, mental health challenges, addictions, and homelessness
- Provide significantly increased funding for mental health services in all schools, ensuring all students have access to these supports
- Employ the principles of youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination across all systems
- Invest in and expand youth housing options as an alternative to foster care placement, including housing and supports specifically for Indigenous youth, LGBTQ2S+ youth, and POC youth
- Offer income supports and services to youth with child welfare involvement up to the age of 25
- Enable youth under 16 to access services and supports without parental signatures
- End police profiling and criminalization of young people who are poor and homeless, including Indigenous and POC youth
- Ensure there are robust, youth-centred after care plans for youth transitioning out of hospitals, rehabilitation centres, detox centres, and recovery houses

## PREVENTING INDIVIDUAL & RELATIONAL CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

Youth homelessness prevention for individuals and families involves tackling the personal circumstances that place young people at risk of homelessness, such as medical crises, family conflict, or mental health issues within the household. Youth identified four areas in which policy change, increased supports, and improved access to services would be beneficial: **family conflict, abuse, and neglect; personal and family crises; social exclusion and isolation;** and **violence in the community.**



### Personal and Relational Challenges Faced by Youth

Youth across Canada recalled countless experiences of conflict, abuse, and neglect, as well as personal health and addiction crises, often stretching over years and across multiple homes. Young people reported caregivers and caregivers' partners physically, sexually, and emotionally abusing them, often in the context of household substance abuse and/or mental health issues. Experiences of violence in the community were also very common in youth's lives. Some youth talked about areas in their city where casual physical and sexual violence was frequent, gangs recruited poor or homeless youth, and young people were encouraged or forced to engage in drug use and/or drug dealing.

Participants explained that youth who are homeless are often extremely vulnerable to these forces, particularly when they are chased out of safer areas by businesses or police officers.

Youth also linked their homelessness to mental health and health issues that went untreated due to the limited availability of supports and services, particularly in rural and remote communities. For many young people, their own challenges with health, mental health, or addictions were preceded by similar challenges that their parents faced with limited supports. These challenges were often intensified by the stigma associated with addiction and mental health issues, contributing to experiences of isolation for young people. Feeling excluded, isolated, and alone was frequently raised in focus groups, with youth reporting that they were “entirely alone,” “had to figure out everything alone,” and “had nobody.”

When asked if they had anyone to help them figure out what to do once they became homeless, *almost all youth across the country said they had no one.*

### **Youth’s Proposed Solutions**

- Provide free family counselling and mediation, including for foster families
- Establish more safe injection sites and youth-focused detox and rehabilitation centres, ensuring services are youth-friendly
- Provide access to free courses, programs, or support groups on parenting and life skills, enabling parents who are struggling with poverty, addiction, and/or mental health issues to access help without fear of criminalization or having their children removed
- Increase the availability of non-judgmental spaces in which young people can talk about experiences of abuse and develop self-esteem, self-worth, and self-respect
- Build recreational and community spaces that are free to access and low-barrier
- Provide free counselling, life skills education, family mediation, and casework supports to caregivers struggling with parenting, including foster families

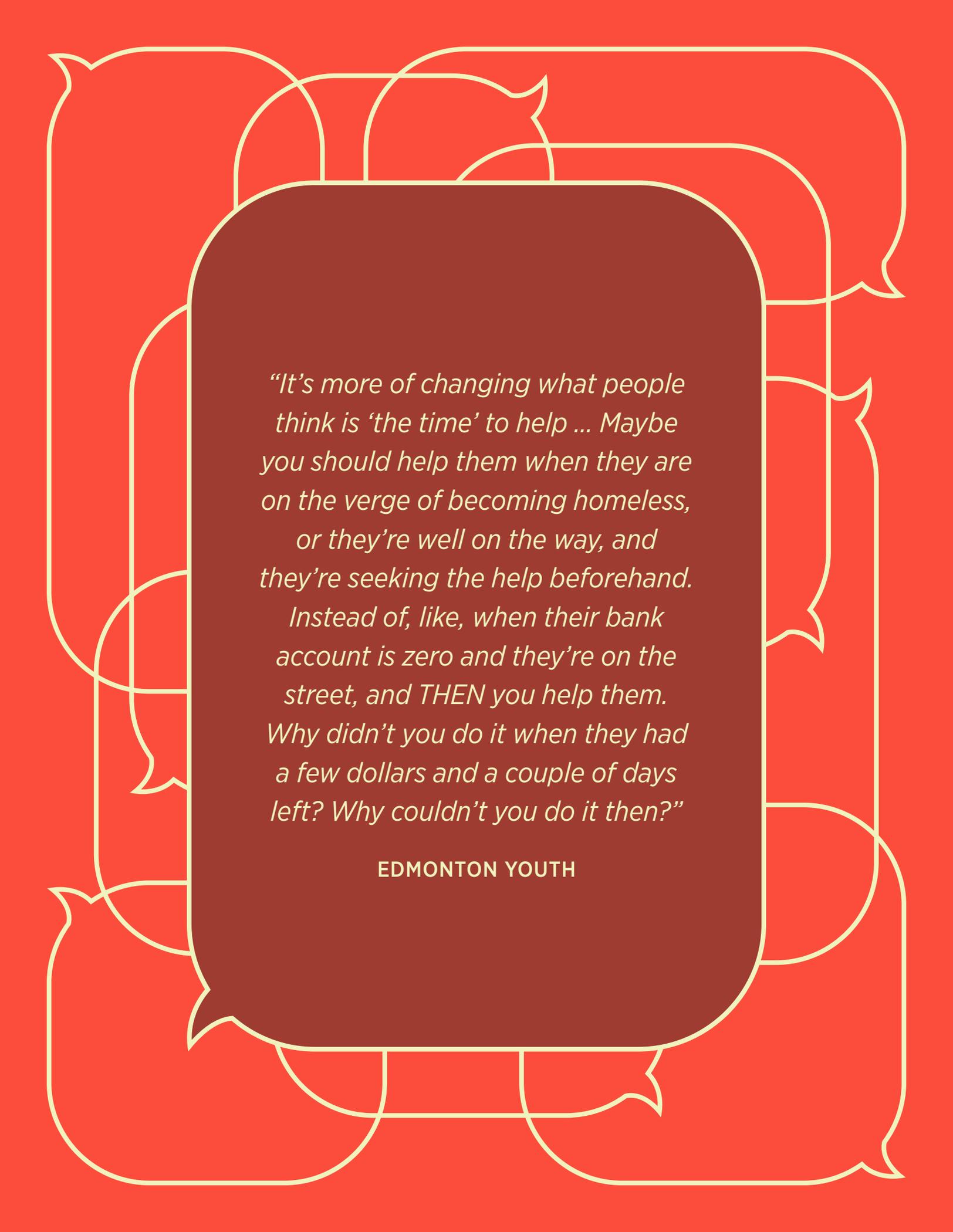
## **It's Time for a Proactive Approach to Youth Homelessness**

Consultations revealed a crucial flaw in our approach to youth homelessness across Canada: we only respond *after* a young person is on the streets. In fact, in many cases we often don't even respond then. Young people across Canada told us that even after they became homeless, they couldn't get help due to lack of available services and housing, long waitlists, not qualifying for services, discrimination, or simply because they were told they weren't "in need enough" to receive help.

Youth were clear – we are waiting too long to intervene when a young person is at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

**Youth showed us that, by building a response that is primarily reactive, we not only condemn youth to hardship and trauma, we actually *ensure* it.**

In order to end youth homelessness, we need to adopt a proactive approach. A proactive approach means we intervene earlier, faster, and more effectively when a young person is at risk of homelessness, and we support youth to transition quickly out of homelessness. Any proactive approach must meaningfully respond to the challenges young people experience, and must centre youth as the experts capable of leading the shift to prevention.



*“It’s more of changing what people think is ‘the time’ to help ... Maybe you should help them when they are on the verge of becoming homeless, or they’re well on the way, and they’re seeking the help beforehand. Instead of, like, when their bank account is zero and they’re on the street, and THEN you help them. Why didn’t you do it when they had a few dollars and a couple of days left? Why couldn’t you do it then?”*

**EDMONTON YOUTH**

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

The results of *What Would it Take?* indicate that we are waiting too long to intervene when young people are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. To address this important finding, we have proposed a number of evidence-based recommendations grounded in human rights and equity. These recommendations are directed at the Government of Canada, provincial and territorial governments, provincial/territorial ministries and departments, and communities. For the full set of recommendations, see [page 125](#).

## GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

1. Implement a Federal Strategy to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness with ambitious targets, supported by a targeted investment. This strategy should be grounded in a commitment to making Canada a world leader in preventing youth homelessness.
2. In renewing the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, the Government of Canada should ensure that youth homelessness and prevention are prioritized and supported by:
  - Targeted investments
  - Directives that support community implementation of youth-focused interventions, including Housing First for Youth
  - A requirement that community systems plans include a targeted youth strategy
3. Embed youth homelessness prevention within the [Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy](#), ensuring that the Strategy provides the social and material supports needed to effectively reduce poverty, housing need, and food insecurity among families with youth.
4. Ensure the housing needs of all youth and their families are adequately addressed and resourced through the [National Housing Strategy](#).



5. Align ministerial, departmental, and program mandates and funding in order to more collaboratively prevent youth homelessness across Canada.
6. Foster meaningful youth engagement in all federal policy development, planning, and implementation processes related to preventing youth homelessness. Ensure the provision of necessary supports (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.
7. Eliminate all policies, laws, and protocols that directly or indirectly discriminate against youth or their families on the basis of their housing status.
8. Provide additional investments to support Indigenous-led reforms of child protection, as outlined in the [Calls to Actions](#) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness: A Proposal for Action](#).
9. Revise the Youth Criminal Justice Act's Judicial Measures and Sentencing to ensure a focus on the decriminalization of youth experiencing homelessness, and that courts follow the directive that judges must consider the youth's ability to pay before a fine is levied.
10. Adopt a national research strategy focused on youth homelessness in order to advance an integrated systems response to preventing youth homelessness, as outlined in [Opportunity Knocks: Prioritizing Canada's Most Vulnerable Youth](#).
11. Implement cross-ministerial engagement and investment to support a youth homelessness strategy, with co-funded programs supported by Employment and Social Development Canada, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, the Department of Justice, Health Canada, Status of Women Canada, and other relevant ministries and departments.

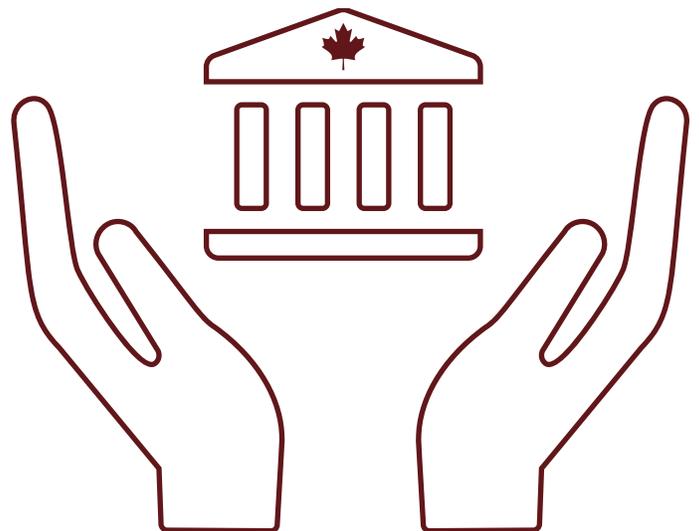


## PROVINCES/TERRITORIES

1. Implement a Provincial/Territorial Strategy to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness, supported by a targeted investment.
2. Embed youth homelessness prevention within Provincial/Territorial Poverty Reduction Strategies, ensuring that the Strategy provides the social and material supports to reduce poverty, housing need, and food insecurity among families with children and youth.
3. In liaison with the federal government, establish provincial/territorial service standards in the area of youth homelessness, which in turn can be tracked provincially to inform funding decisions.
4. Prioritize and support systems integration in all efforts to proactively address the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. As part of this systems integration, all provincial/territorial ministries and departments should be mandated to identify their roles and responsibilities in addressing youth homelessness.
5. Invest in provincial/territorial knowledge development and data management specific to youth homelessness in order to advance an integrated systems approach to youth homelessness prevention.
6. Engage in the ongoing review of current system barriers to assess how the prevention of youth homelessness can be improved across systems, including through integration and improved access to services, supports, and housing for youth and their families.
7. Foster meaningful youth engagement in all provincial/territorial policy development, planning, and implementation processes that affect youth at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness. Ensure the provision of necessary supports (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.
8. Create provincial/territorial housing and shelter standards that meet the diverse needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, developed in partnership with youth and Indigenous communities.
9. Support communities to implement harm reduction models that focus on reducing the risks or harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive or other behaviours that pose risks for youth.

## INTEGRATED GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS

1. Work across ministries, departments, systems, and sectors to employ an integrated systems approach to proactively address the diverse needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.
2. Implement policy, strategies, training, and accountability mechanisms to support anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, solutions- and equity-oriented practice among frontline and managerial staff in all public systems who work with youth. All systems should develop targeted approaches to meet the needs of youth who are often served least well by public systems. Systems should be particularly attentive to ensuring equity for youth with disabilities, youth with mental health and addiction challenges, Indigenous youth, poor youth, youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, and youth experiencing abuse or neglect.
3. Provide integrated, ongoing, and meaningful training and supports for all system workers to ensure staff employ equitable, evidence-based practices in their interactions with youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Training and supports must be adequately resourced with targeted investments, enabling workers sufficient time and supports to ensure their approach aligns with evidence-based practices.
4. Adopt accountability mechanisms to assess the system's progress towards proactively addressing the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.
5. Implement highly accessible mechanisms through which children and youth, and their caregivers or advocates, can report system failures, violations of their rights, and failures of system actors to respond ethically, adequately, or equitably.
6. Work across departments, ministries, and sectors to ensure housing stability and ongoing supports and services for young people who are transitioning from mental health care, child protection services, and corrections. This must involve harmonizing data and assessment tools to ensure youth leaving systems of care do not transition into homelessness.



## COMMUNITIES

1. Develop and implement a community-level strategy or plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness with ambitious targets, supported by a targeted investment.

2. Prioritize and support systems integration (where appropriate) in all efforts to proactively address the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

3. Foster meaningful youth engagement in the development of community policies and responses that affect youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Ensure the provision of necessary supports (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.

4. In reflecting on practice and programmatic responses to youth homelessness as articulated in the community-level strategy, community organizations should ensure prevention-based activities exist within the continuum of supports provided to youth.



# INTRODUCTION

Youth homelessness in Canada is an ongoing problem for which we are making slow but insufficient headway.

In our efforts to end homelessness, we have primarily focused on providing emergency services and supports to young people while they are homeless. While this is important and generally well-meaning, we need to question whether this is enough; whether waiting for young people to become homeless before we help them is both sufficient and the right thing to do. In considering how we might reform our response to youth homelessness, young people with lived experience of homelessness need to have their voices heard. Their valuable insights drawn from their experiences can challenge our current thinking and point to a new approach that more effectively helps young people before they end up on the streets.



*“If you are sleeping outside, in the middle of - like, why does it have to get THAT BAD before you qualify for help that you could have used like a year ago?”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

**Between July 2017 and January 2018, A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness consulted with over 100 youth on what it would take to prevent youth homelessness in Canada.**

We asked youth with lived experiences of homelessness what supports and services they wanted, what system and structural changes are needed, and how they want to be involved in making these changes. We also asked youth directly about what would have stopped them from becoming homeless, and what they wanted the Canadian government to know about youth homelessness prevention. This document reports on the findings of these consultations, demonstrating the depth and breadth of youth’s insights and passion for change.

Youth across Canada were clear:  
*We are waiting too long to  
intervene when a young person  
is at risk of homelessness.*



Youth showed us that, by building a response that is primarily reactive, we not only condemn youth to hardship and trauma, we actually ensure it by refusing to provide youth with resources, services, and supports they need until after they become homeless.

**Youth were resolute – this must change, and it must change now.**

Adopting a proactive approach to youth homelessness means addressing the intersectional drivers of marginalization, discrimination, poverty, and inequity that put youth at risk. Importantly, consultations with young people revealed the unique importance of homelessness prevention within systems – including education, child welfare, healthcare and addictions services, the youth homelessness sector, and the criminal justice system. Most youth traced the origins of their homelessness back to systems failures - inadequate policy and service delivery within systems that contribute to homelessness for young people. In fact, our conversations with youth indicate that many of the personal and interpersonal challenges we identify as risk factors for homelessness – such as family conflict or health challenges – *often become pathways into homelessness when systems failures occur*. Youth explained that when they were provided with access to the right supports and services, their risk of homelessness decreased dramatically. Given this, many youth felt that systems change is where youth homelessness prevention efforts could be *most effective*.

*“We just need more partnerships and collaboration with the levels of government. Working with non-profits and social services and people that experience it. And developers. Just reminding the government that it’s not just one ministry’s issue to deal with housing—it’s all of them. Like, from the collective earlier this year, we went to a meeting and we were just telling them that, “Hey...Children and Youth and Government Care, it’s not just the Ministry of Children and Family Development...it’s not just their guardians. It’s like all of you guys! It’s the BC government, it’s the Ministry of Health, and Education, and Environment, and Transportation. Like, it’s all of you guys.”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

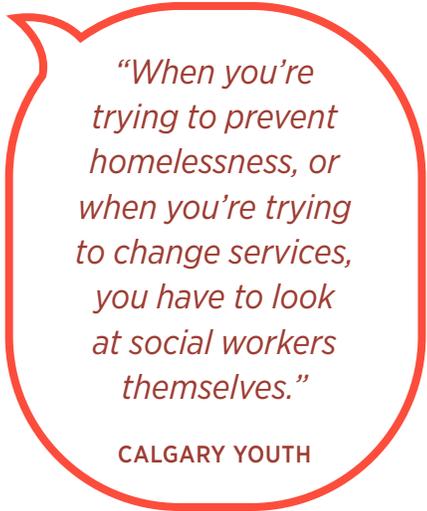
Systems change is difficult work. To effectively prevent youth homelessness across systems, an integrated systems approach is needed in which multiple departments and ministries across all levels of government work collectively towards the goal of better outcomes for all youth. This requires expanding the role of systems like education or healthcare in homelessness prevention, as well as re-defining who “owns” the issue of youth homelessness. Many systems have not seen themselves as responsible for ensuring young people are housed, nor have they been provided with the mandate, resources, or tools to do this work. However, it is clear that assigning sole responsibility of this issue to the youth homelessness sector makes it very difficult to prevent homelessness before it happens. Homelessness prevention thus must go hand-in-hand with the tough work of redefining how systems and institutions work, and see themselves.

## This work also means that we need to redefine our approach at the ground level – system delivery.

A crucial finding of this study was the frequency with which youth’s experiences of violence, discrimination, abuse, and neglect were ignored or discounted by the very people they thought would help them: healthcare professionals, child welfare workers, social workers, teachers, principals, and police officers. In many cases youth felt further marginalized, traumatized, and isolated because of these interactions, and some felt they became homeless as a direct result of professionals’ behaviours. These findings remind us that young people primarily engage with systems *through the professionals that work within them.*

**This means that while an integrated systems approach is vital to this work, it must be accompanied by changes in approach and practice at the frontlines as well.**

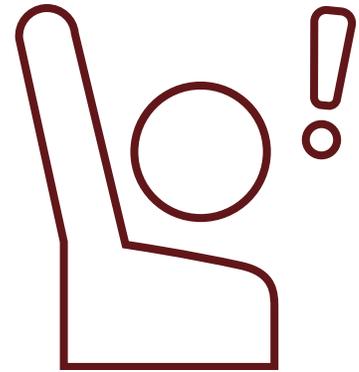
To make this happen, frontline system staff in multiple systems must be provided with the necessary resources, training, mentorship, and education to do this work. It is also essential that professionals like nurses, teachers, and police officers begin to view themselves as playing a decisive role in whether young people become homeless or not.



*“When you’re trying to prevent homelessness, or when you’re trying to change services, you have to look at social workers themselves.”*

CALGARY YOUTH

As we shift towards prevention across Canada, this work must be grounded in the voices, experiences, and desires of young people who have experienced homelessness.



Youth not only know what supports are necessary and how systems have failed them, they have concrete and innovative solutions to offer. Unfortunately, most youth reported that they have been given few opportunities to engage in policy change or share their experiences and insights with decision makers. This document aims to amplify the voices of these young people, centering these youth as the experts that should drive policy and practice change. It is our responsibility to find ways to centre youth in this shift to prevention and compensate them for their contributions, including specifically the voices and experiences of Indigenous youth.

*“Making a youth-driven approach would best instead of dictating what goes on and how we’re going to prevent youth homelessness. Maybe let the youth figure out what would be in their best interests.”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

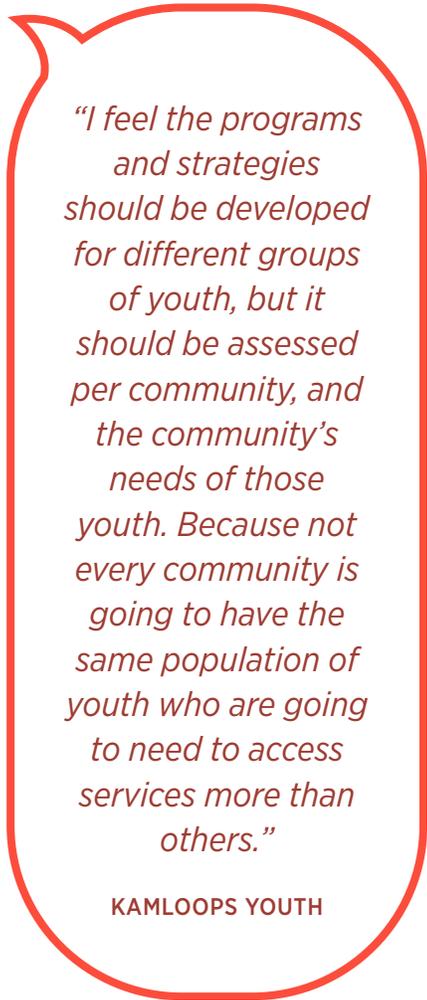
Findings from this report also highlight the need for community-specific strategies to prevent youth homelessness, responsive to the unique needs of youth in the community. In particular, respect for Indigenous communities’ right to self-determination and self-governance is paramount for developing youth homelessness prevention efforts that can tackle the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in homeless populations.

**It is essential that Indigenous communities are provided with the resources necessary to do this work.**

Finally, youth homelessness prevention must go hand-in-hand with the realization of human rights for all children across Canada, as outlined in the report [Youth Rights, Right Now](#). All young people have the human right to housing, education, health, food, and an adequate standard of living as outlined in a number of international treaties Canada is signatory to, including the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#). Further, as ratified in the [UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), Indigenous youth additionally have the right to practice their cultures and customs and “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.”

By almost any measure, youth homelessness in Canada is a violation of human rights and the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Recognized as such, we must be bold in our efforts to rectify this injustice. Adopting a vision for youth homelessness prevention, grounded in the lived realities of young people, is a crucial step in this journey.



*“I feel the programs and strategies should be developed for different groups of youth, but it should be assessed per community, and the community’s needs of those youth. Because not every community is going to have the same population of youth who are going to need to access services more than others.”*

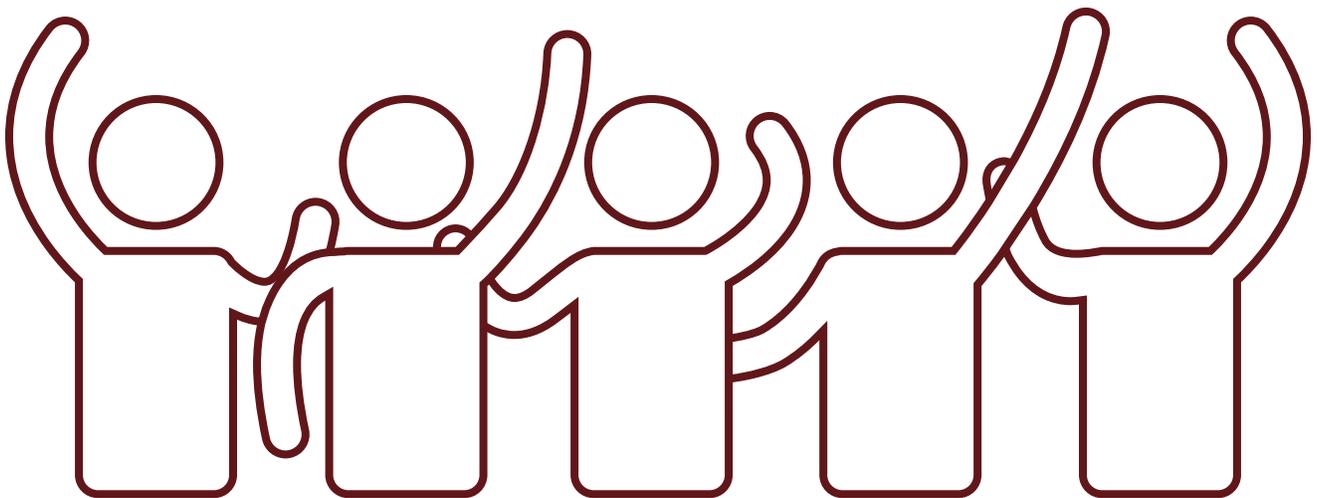
KAMLOOPS YOUTH

# STUDY PURPOSE

While there has been an interest in homelessness prevention among Canadian governments, communities, and social service providers in recent years, youth themselves have rarely been consulted on what they believe can prevent young people from becoming homeless. Between July 2017 and January 2018, *A Way Home Canada* and the *Canadian Observatory on Homelessness* consulted with youth across Canada to ask:

- What would have prevented your homelessness?
- What programs, policies, services, and supports are needed to prevent youth homelessness?
- What do you want to tell the Canadian government about preventing youth homelessness?
- How do you want to be involved in making change on this issue?

The purpose of this report is to amplify the voices, insights, and wisdom of these young people in order to drive policy and practice change.



# CONSULTATION PROCESS

National consultations with youth experiencing homelessness were conducted between July 2017 and January 2018. Consultations were held in 12 different communities, and participating organizations or agencies were selected in order to ensure equitable regional representation and the representation of a range of sub-populations (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ youth). Given the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth among homeless populations, three agencies primarily serving Indigenous youth were invited to participate. The consultations with youth experiencing homelessness occurred in three stages:

## STAGE 1

A total of 11 youth-serving agencies across the country hosted 1-2 hour focus groups on youth homelessness prevention. Peers, agency/organization staff, and/or research team members led focus groups, and the research team provided training materials and support. All focus group participants also completed a short demographic survey. Following the completion of all focus groups, the research team conducted preliminary data analysis.

## STAGE 2

In Winnipeg, MB, seven youth participants from across the country came together to discuss and build upon the initial findings of the study. Following this consultation, the research team conducted further data analysis and created a draft report.

## STAGE 3

An initial draft of the report was shared with eight youth from participating agencies in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, and Kamloops. These young people provided written or verbal feedback to the research team, which was then integrated into the final report.





Consultation group - A Way Home Kamloops Youth Against Youth Homelessness team

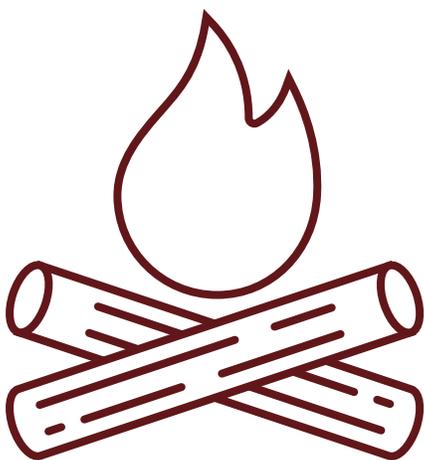
# ENGAGEMENT WITH INDIGENOUS PARTNERS



Foundational to this study was a focus on developing close partnerships with Indigenous communities and Indigenous-serving youth agencies who participated in this research. Crucial to this work was the development of relations of trust, particularly given the violence that western knowledge production has enacted towards Indigenous communities. To that end, the research team sought to follow Indigenous research protocols and ensure respect for local customs, protocols, and traditions, guided by Métis-Cree scholar Jesse Thistle.

Prior to beginning the study, research team members requested to meet with Elders connected to each Indigenous-serving agency in the study.

Of the three participating organizations that primarily serve Indigenous youth, we were able to meet with Elders connected with two of these organizations – Hamilton Regional Indian Centre (Hamilton, ON) and Broadway Youth Resource Centre (Vancouver, BC). Offering a traditional gift of tobacco, team members asked each Elder for permission to conduct the research in partnership with the community, and for guidance as the research proceeded. The team was deeply honoured to have their requests accepted, and to be invited to enter into ceremony with Elders, Indigenous service providers, and Indigenous youth in two communities. In Vancouver, BC, team member Kaitlin Schwan entered into a Star Blanket Ceremony with the community. In Paris, ON, four team members (Schwan, Gaetz, Redman, and Dej) participated in a Haudenosaunee Edge of the Woods Ceremony and feast, over the span of two days.



The research team was honoured to receive traditional teachings as part of these ceremonies, and was able to offer a gift to each community.

**The relations of trust built during these ceremonies will continue to guide the development of our work as we move forward together. We are deeply humbled by the kindness, generosity, and trust extended by our Indigenous partners.**

# CONSULTATIONS WITH YOUTH

12

*communities*

17

*focus groups*

7

*provinces & territories*

114

*youth participants*

## YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

Yellowknife, NT - **9**

Toronto, ON - **10**

Guelph, ON - **5**

Hamilton, ON - **9**

Lanark Country, ON - **7**

Montreal, QC - **25**

Kamloops, BC - **9**

Vancouver, BC - **11**

Winnipeg, MB - **1**

Calgary, AB - **11**

Edmonton, AB - **11**

St. John's, NL - **5**



# 62%

*Self-identified as currently experiencing homelessness, or having experienced homelessness in the past*



# 21.8

*Was the average age of youth*

# 21%

*Identified as Persons of Colour (POC)*

# 36%

*Identified as Indigenous*

## GENDER

*Cisgender Female - 37%*

*Cisgender Male - 51%*

*Non-Identifier - 1%*

*Gender Variant - 1%*

*Gender Non-conforming - 2%*

*Two-Spirited - 1%*

*Transgender - 3%*

*Genderqueer - 1%*

*Gender-fluid - 1%*

## SEXUALITY

*Straight/Heterosexual - 60%*

*Bisexual - 13%*

*Queer - 3%*

*Asexual - 1%*

*Pansexual - 9%*

*Questioning - 3%*

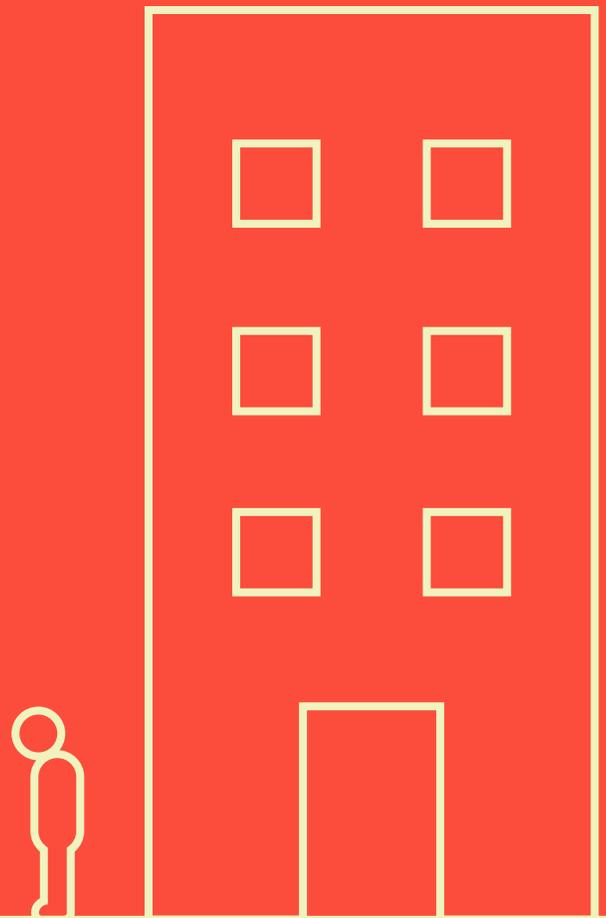
*Gay - 6%*

*Lesbian - 1%*

# EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT

A total of 48% of youth participants had not yet graduated from high school, and almost half of these young people were not engaged in school (46%). Among youth who had attained less than a grade 9 education (9%), half of these were not currently in school (50%). Among all youth who participated, 32% were not engaged with education or employment.

A total of 46% of youth had graduated from high school. Among all study participants, 27% had obtained some university or college education, and 8% had graduated from university or college. A total of 37% were currently in school, and 28% were currently employed.



## MENTAL HEALTH & DISABILITY

47%

Identified as having a disability

## CHILD WELFARE INVOLVEMENT

55%

Had been involved with child welfare

48%

Had received a mental health diagnosis

42%

Had lived in a group home at some point in their lives

43%

Had been in foster care at some point in their lives

# WHAT IS YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION?

While preventing homelessness is generally regarded as a good thing, we often have little clarity about what “homelessness prevention” actually means. In 2017, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness released [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention](#) in order to address this lack of clarity. In *A New Direction*, homelessness prevention is defined as:

“Policies, practices, and interventions that reduce the likelihood that someone will experience homelessness. It also means providing those who have been homeless with the necessary resources and supports to stabilize their housing, enhance integration and social inclusion, and ultimately reduce the risk of the recurrence of homelessness.”

As part of this work, *A New Direction* adapted the public health model of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention to outline how we might think about homelessness prevention in Canada:

## **PRIMARY PREVENTION**

refers to structural-level initiatives that apply to everyone, in order to reduce the risk of homelessness and build protective factors.

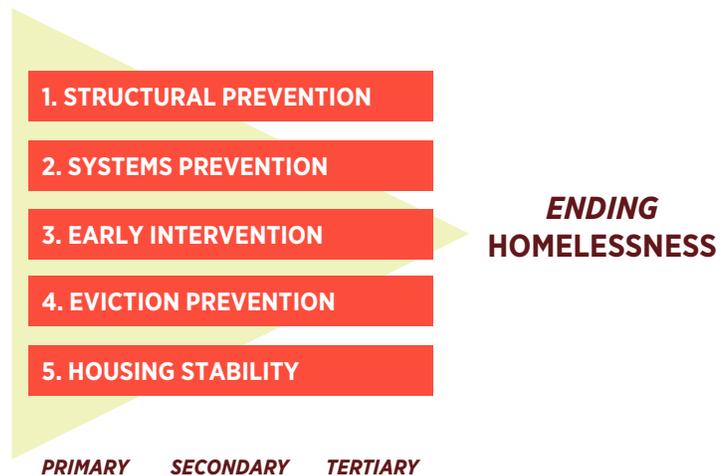
## **SECONDARY PREVENTION**

are intervention strategies aimed at those who are at imminent risk of homelessness, as well as those who have recently become homeless, with the intention of avoiding homelessness or moving out of homelessness as quickly as possible.

## **TERTIARY PREVENTION**

are prevention initiatives that support individuals and families who have previously experienced homelessness to ensure that it doesn't happen again.

A *New Direction* emphasized that these classifications exist along a continuum. In order to effectively prevent homelessness, all three forms of prevention must occur simultaneously. The [Homelessness Prevention Framework](#) also includes a typology that outlines five areas in which legislation, policies, interventions, and practices can contribute to the prevention of homelessness in Canada.



While adults and youth who are homeless experience some of the same challenges, the causes and experiences of homelessness for youth are unique, calling for a distinct approach to youth homelessness prevention. In this report, young people outline how homelessness prevention can best meet the needs of young people.

## WHAT YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION IS *NOT*

This definition is intended to provide clarity and precision about what the prevention of youth homelessness is, but also what it is not. We must be clear - the prevention of youth homelessness must entail keeping a young person housed. While emergency services often provide a range of programs and supports that build resilience, skills, and reduce the most negative impacts of homelessness (e.g., starvation, exposure to extreme weather), these interventions cannot be described as homelessness prevention because they do not directly (or even indirectly) prevent the occurrence or reoccurrence of homelessness.

Likewise, the term prevention is also often used to describe interventions for young people who are currently experiencing homelessness that may, in the long run, contribute to housing stability, such as life skills, addictions supports, mental health supports, or employment and education services.

**While such interventions are clearly important, they cannot be considered homelessness prevention unless they are provided in a context wherein young people have immediate access to housing.**

Any services and supports that are provided to people who are homeless in an emergency context – no matter how helpful and beneficial – cannot be considered to be youth homelessness prevention if the young person remains in an ongoing state of homelessness with no immediate prospect of exiting.

# YOUTH'S PERSPECTIVES ON PREVENTION

## WHERE SHOULD WE FOCUS OUR PREVENTION EFFORTS?

Consultations with youth across the country reveal that there are multiple, intersecting reasons why a young person becomes homeless. Rather than having a single cause, many youth described their homelessness as the cumulative impact of a number of factors. Most importantly, young people were clear that efforts to prevent homelessness must occur simultaneously in many parts of society, such as schools, the housing system, and within families.

Youth's perspectives on homelessness prevention can be organized using a social-ecological model that positions youth homelessness as the outcome of a complex and intricate interplay between three domains: structural factors, systems failures, and individual and relational factors (Gaetz et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2014). Within each of these domains, youth identified key areas where prevention efforts are needed. This report uses this model to organize youth's perspectives on homelessness prevention:

### 1. STRUCTURAL PREVENTION

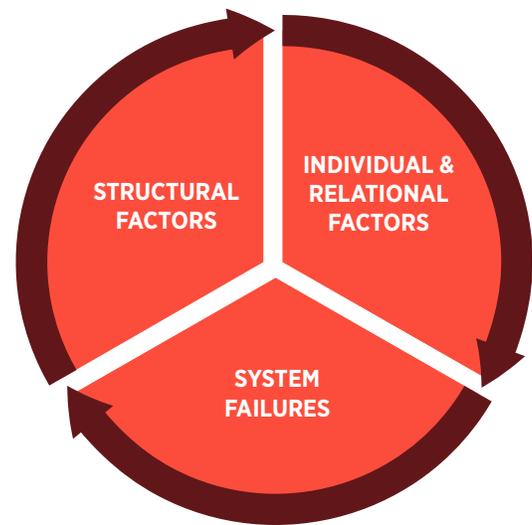
- Poverty
- Lack of Housing
- Colonization
- Inequity & Discrimination
- Harmful Societal Beliefs & Values
- Adverse Childhood Experiences

### 2. SYSTEMS PREVENTION

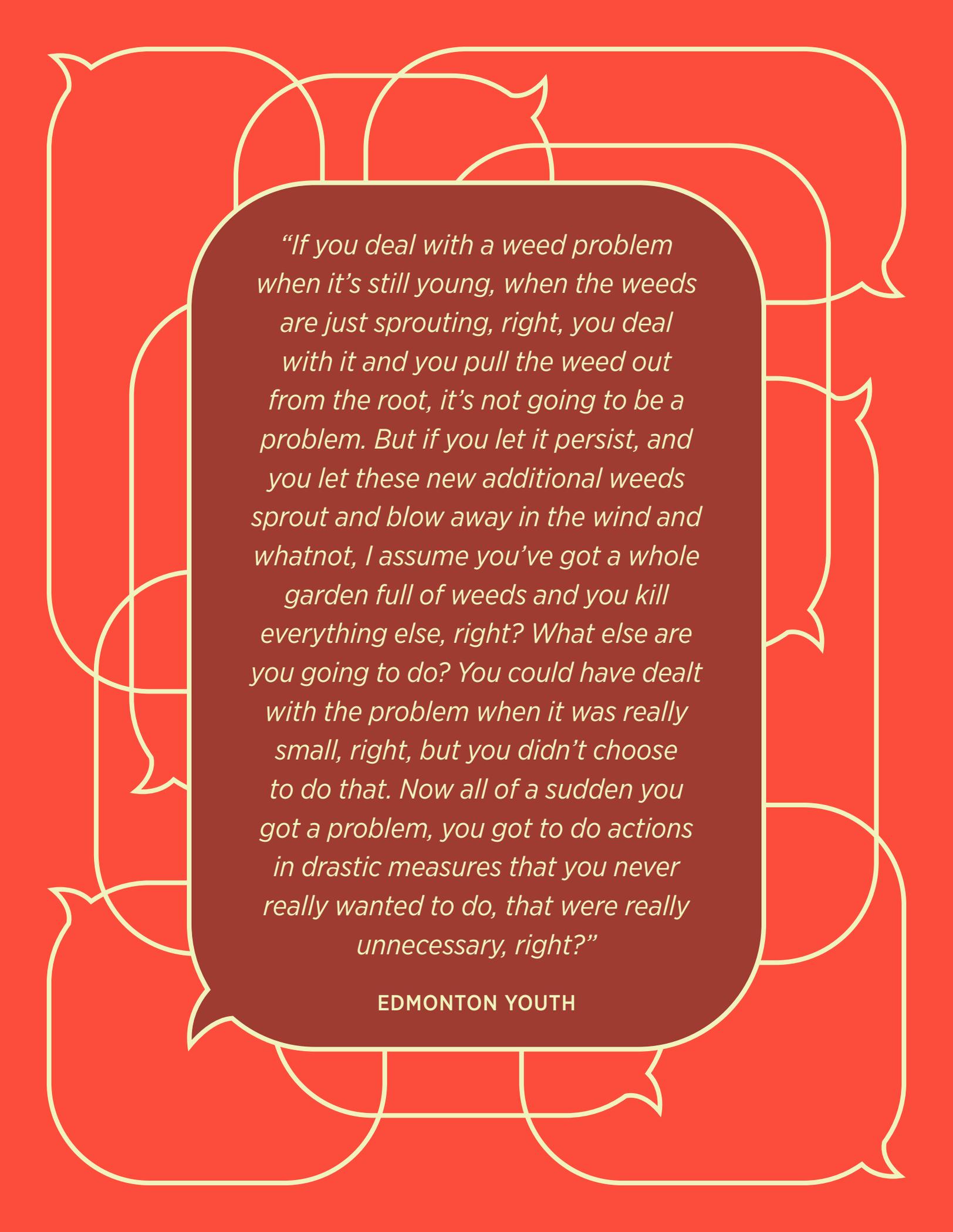
- Education
- Child Welfare
- Healthcare & Addictions
- Youth homelessness sector
- Criminal Justice

### 3. PREVENTING INDIVIDUAL & RELATIONAL CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

- Family Conflict, Abuse, & Neglect
- Personal & Family Crises
- Social Exclusion & Isolation
- Violence in the Community



CAUSES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS



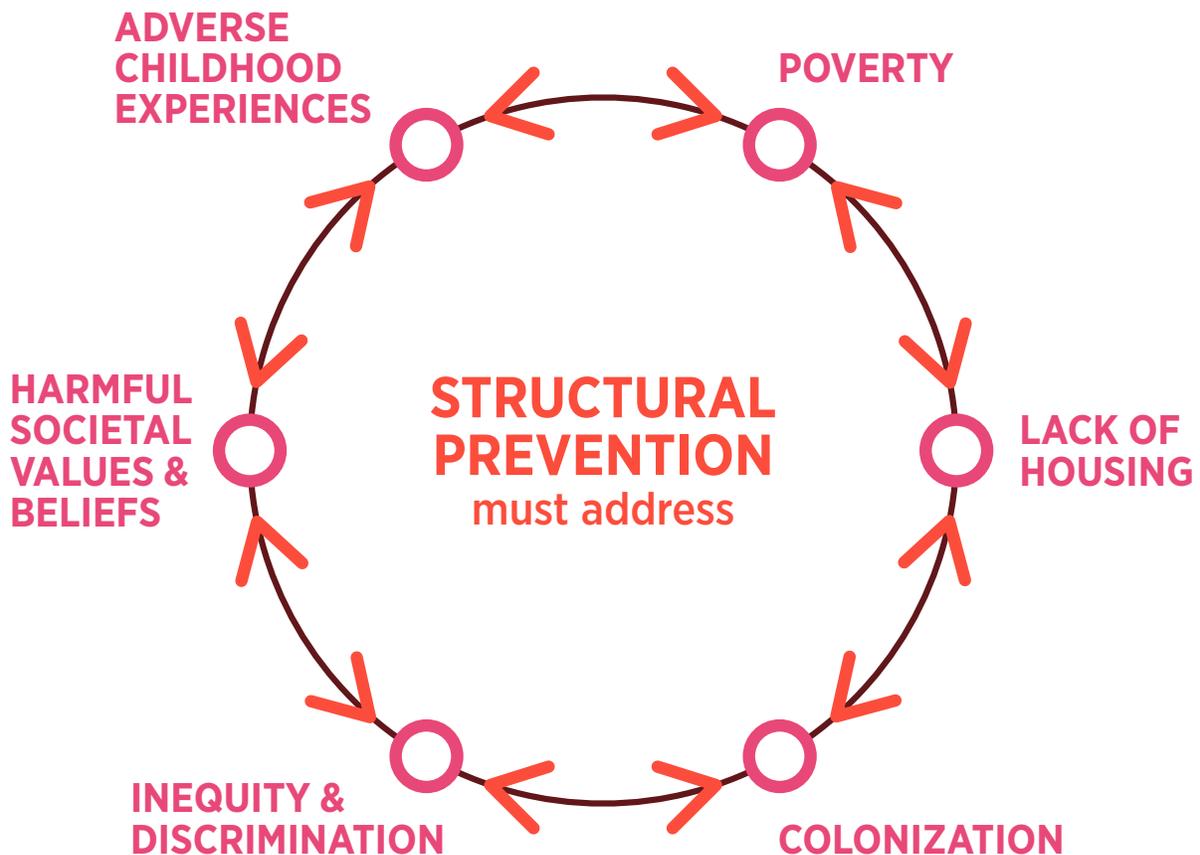
*“If you deal with a weed problem when it’s still young, when the weeds are just sprouting, right, you deal with it and you pull the weed out from the root, it’s not going to be a problem. But if you let it persist, and you let these new additional weeds sprout and blow away in the wind and whatnot, I assume you’ve got a whole garden full of weeds and you kill everything else, right? What else are you going to do? You could have dealt with the problem when it was really small, right, but you didn’t choose to do that. Now all of a sudden you got a problem, you got to do actions in drastic measures that you never really wanted to do, that were really unnecessary, right?”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

# 1. STRUCTURAL PREVENTION

Young people across the country described youth homelessness as rooted in the *structures* of Canada: the social, political, economic, and societal values that underpin our society. While these structural factors influence all members of Canadian society, they especially impact the opportunities and outcomes of youth who are at risk of homelessness or find themselves unhoused.

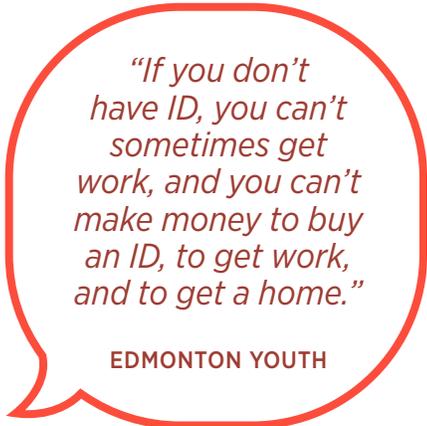
**Many youth felt that in order to prevent youth homelessness in Canada, structural reform is needed to address six key challenges:**



Importantly, youth explained that these structural issues interact in ways that *mutually reinforce* inequity and poverty, trapping youth in cycles of marginalization and homelessness. Across these structural challenges, several important patterns emerged:

- Structural issues are linked together in youth’s experiences, meaning that young people often experience multiple structural problems *at the same time*.
- Experiencing one type of structural issue often *amplifies the effects and consequences* of other structural and system issues. Youth reported that when they face one type of structural issue (e.g., low social assistance rates), they are more likely to feel the effects of other structural problems (e.g., lack of affordable housing). As a result, youth often felt trapped in circular processes of exclusion that they, and the people supporting them, couldn’t find a way out of.
- Structural issues are embedded in Canadian colonial history, legislation, and policy, implemented within all orders of government. These provide context for, and directly contribute to, homelessness among specific groups of youth.
- Due to systemic forms of oppression, such as racism, structural problems particularly affect youth facing discrimination and exclusion on the basis of their identities or experiences (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ youth or youth with mental health challenges). This means that in tight housing and job markets, marginalized youth who face discrimination are even less likely to obtain housing or employment.

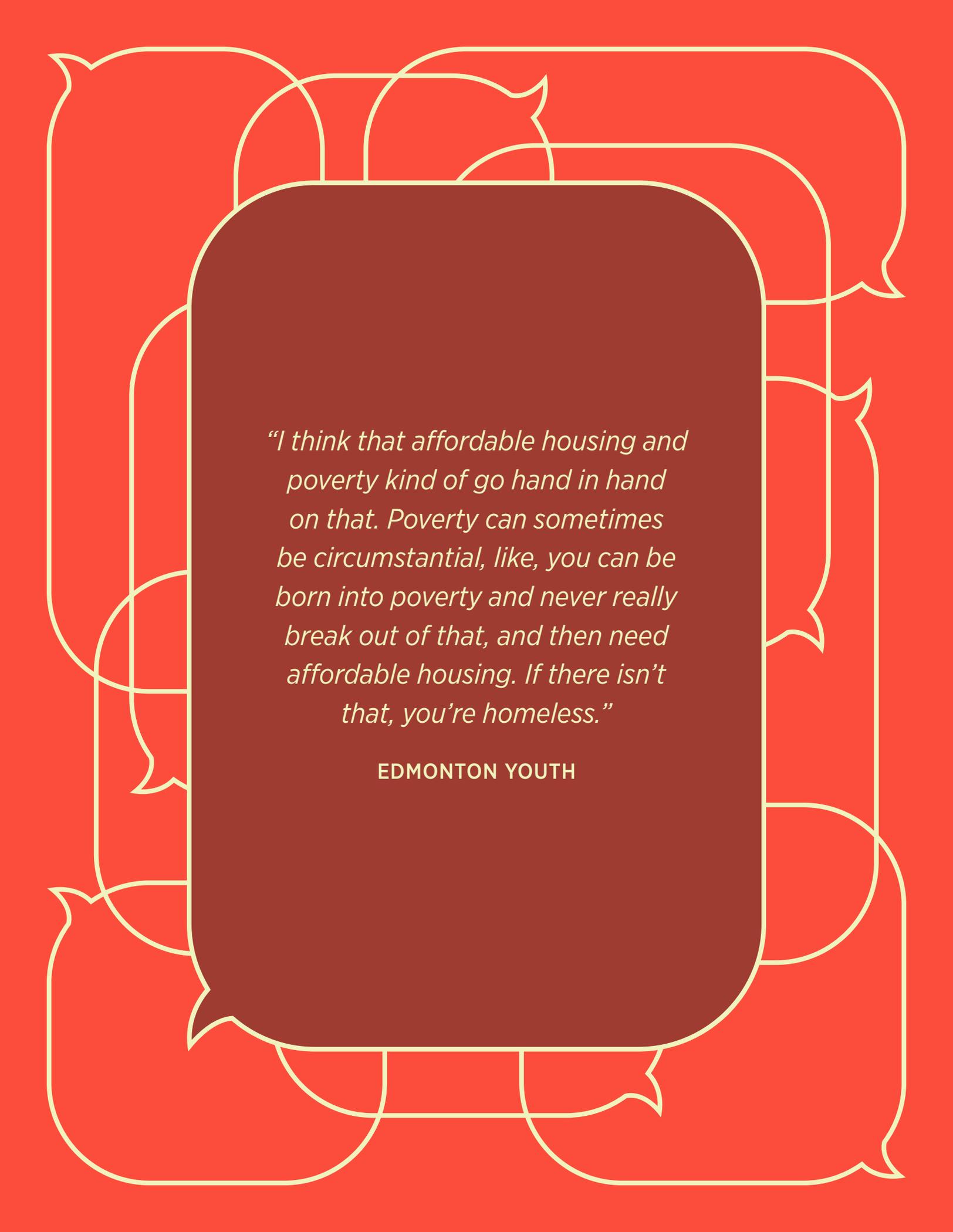
These observations remind us that youth homelessness prevention cannot be the work of the youth homelessness sector alone.



*“If you don’t have ID, you can’t sometimes get work, and you can’t make money to buy an ID, to get work, and to get a home.”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

It means that we cannot avoid tackling head-on the wicked problems that have plagued Canada for centuries: income inequality, colonial violence, patriarchy, environmental destruction, inequity, and human rights abuses. Fortunately, young people across the country offer us practical, compelling solutions for implementing the structural change necessary to ensure better outcomes for all youth.



*“I think that affordable housing and poverty kind of go hand in hand on that. Poverty can sometimes be circumstantial, like, you can be born into poverty and never really break out of that, and then need affordable housing. If there isn’t that, you’re homeless.”*

**EDMONTON YOUTH**

# 1.1 POVERTY

The journey into homelessness for many youth begins with childhood experiences of poverty. In addition to poor and precarious housing, youth discussed cycling in and out of family homelessness, trying to hide their poverty from their classmates, and experiencing neglect because caregivers simply couldn't make ends meet. Multiple youth discussed going hungry regularly, repairing their clothing during art class, borrowing spare change from friends, or having to use their school's hot-glue gun to mend their shoes.

**These experiences of poverty preceded child welfare involvement for some, though several youth reported similar poverty and neglect in foster care.**



Poverty refers to the challenges people face when trying to meet their basic needs. Lack of adequate income is the basis of poverty, and can contribute to inadequate shelter, nutritional vulnerability, and poor health and well-being. Though not all youth experienced poverty as children, poverty became a fairly universal experience once youth were kicked out or forced to leave home.

In focus groups across the country, youth explained that lack of income was a key reason they became homeless or were unable to escape homelessness.

*“Especially recently, I’ve had to choose a lot between, like, getting functional clothing that isn’t torn to shit and being able to buy food.”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

When asked what would have prevented their homelessness, youth from different backgrounds and regions frequently responded “a job,” “more income,” or “more employment opportunities.” For many, experiences of poverty were intergenerational and cyclical, making it difficult to rely on the resources of family or friends to escape.

Youth identified three key drivers of poverty that need to be tackled in youth homelessness prevention efforts: (1) low social assistance rates, (2) systemic barriers to obtaining social assistance or employment, and (3) low wages and tight job markets.

## LOW SOCIAL ASSISTANCE RATES

Many youth attributed their poverty to social assistance rates that were much too low to live on, and impossible to build futures with. Social assistance rates were often so low that young people were forced to choose between paying rent, eating, or clothing themselves. Without access to adequate income, youth struggled to procure housing or obtain a job, often lacking the funds for transit fare or professional clothing to attend interviews. Many youth viewed government cuts to social assistance programs as directly producing homelessness in Canada.

*“I find that it’s already difficult to get by on \$600 a month [of social assistance], especially with housing prices ... Even if you have housing... if you’re lucky, with some roommates, it’s \$300. That’s half. It leaves you with \$300. I even have supports here [at the agency] and I eat from the trash. That’s how I feed myself ... How can anyone get out of it? You can’t even save.”*

MONTREAL YOUTH

## SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO OBTAINING SOCIAL ASSISTANCE OR EMPLOYMENT

Youth described multiple barriers to accessing social assistance and employment. With respect to income supports, youth described difficulties navigating multiple bureaucratic barriers and requirements that they were often unable to meet (e.g., identity documents, proof of citizenship, proof of income or residence). Youth also experienced difficulty accessing income supports when shifting from one form of social assistance to another (e.g., child welfare and disability support programs), a gap that some felt increased their risk of homelessness. Lack of knowledge about where and how to apply for social assistance was also an issue for some young people, and some youth reported feeling stigmatized, embarrassed, or put down during the application process.

### **For youth who did qualify, funding was often slow to come through and some youth had become homeless before they could access funds.**

Youth also discussed at length the challenges they faced when applying for employment, including: lack of ID, limited resume-writing skills, limited funds for transit, few references, few educational credentials, and no address or phone number to list on a resume. Youth explained that these factors made it difficult to gain work experience, and this lack of experience was often cited as a reason for not being hired.



*“I know for a lot of people, again, getting welfare, and especially getting onto disability, is super difficult. And even when it goes through it, it takes a long time, which is a problem because the inherent thing about being close to homelessness is that you don’t have much time.”*

**VANCOUVER YOUTH**

## LOW WAGES & TIGHT JOB MARKETS

In the context of tight job markets across Canada, youth explained that they only qualified for low-wage jobs that were precarious, often involving shift work and/or unpredictable hours that changed frequently. Rarely did these jobs take advantage of their skills or talents, or offer opportunities for growth or permanency. These low-wage positions often made it difficult to make ends meet, and several youth described falling into homelessness after their minimal work hours were cut further. Youth with disabilities often felt screened out of the hiring process on the basis of their disability, and youth described discrimination on the basis of class as common.

*“If you drop off a resume somewhere and they have their address listed as the drop-in, they’re not going to give you the job. No matter what”*

CALGARY YOUTH

Many youth attempted to remain engaged in school while being homeless and employed. Several youth described working minimum wage jobs, sleeping on the street, and falling asleep in class as a way of life.

*“Even just applying for income support is hard. Like, the workers are disgruntled and rude. If you’re not there early enough, you’re not going to get any help that day. Half the time, it feels like they’re sabotaging you too. It’s just a lot of stigma.”*

EDMONTON YOUTH



# ADDRESSING POVERTY: Youth's Proposed Solutions

## Policy & System Change

- Stimulate job creation for young people, including through the provision of financial supports (e.g., grants) for young people to create their own jobs and businesses
- Increase access to affordable childcare for youth who have children
- Remove policies that prohibit recipients from saving income while receiving social assistance
- Given that many people on social assistance cannot make ends meet, remove policies that prohibit recipients from working while receiving social assistance
- Discipline employers for discriminatory hiring practices
- Create accessible pathways for obtaining social assistance for young people and their families
- Decrease wait times for receiving social assistance
- Reduce bureaucratic barriers and cost to obtaining identity documents

## Investments

- Increase social assistance rates
- Reduce or remove the cost of postsecondary education
- Stop making cuts to social programs
- Create emergency relief funds for youth and their families experiencing crises or facing eviction
- Provide financial support to youth who are transitioning between different systems (e.g., between child welfare and disability support programs)
- Lower the cost of public transportation

## Professional Conduct & Training

- Ensure staff administering social assistance treat youth equitably, compassionately, and with respect, and do not shame youth for their poverty or choices
- Implement mandatory training for employers on the rights of youth employees and their responsibilities as an employer of a young person

## Interventions

- Provide education on obtaining employment (e.g., resume creation, interviewing) in schools and social services, ensuring there is targeted outreach strategy for marginalized youth to access this knowledge
- Create and fund programs, incentives, and supports for employers to hire and retain youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, as well as youth experiencing exclusion due to disability, mental health, and health challenges
- Provide accessible opportunities and programs for young artists and entrepreneurs to start their own businesses
- Provide concrete, hands-on support to connect youth to employment and training opportunities
- Offer employment training programs that prepare youth for jobs that are available, inspiring, pay livable wages, and suit their skills and needs
- Support youth to obtain secure employment following training programs

## MOVING FORWARD

To ensure better outcomes for youth who are struggling, we need to prevent poverty in the homes of young people before they experience homelessness. Findings from this study and the [Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey](#) demonstrate that a great number of youth experience poverty at a young age, and yet we often provide resources only after a young person becomes homeless.

*“The first time that I ever really realized that food was a hard thing to get was when I was here and Calgary and I watched my brother eat a chicken strip out of the garbage from a KFC bucket.”*

CALGARY YOUTH

If we want to prevent youth homelessness, we need to ensure that young people’s families have the income to support their growth, well-being, security, and education.

This means that poverty reduction must be a central pillar of youth homelessness prevention. It also means that we need to embed youth homelessness prevention within federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal poverty reduction strategies.

**We also need to ensure that our prevention efforts are based on a candid assessment of the current Canadian economy.**



Income inequality continues to grow in many Canadian cities, with the mass accumulation of wealth for a few and deep poverty for many (Green, Riddell, & St. Hilaire, 2017). The job market today is difficult for almost any young person (Ng, Lyons, & Schweitzer, 2016). In this context, the deeply held belief that youth who are homeless can “bootstrap” themselves out of poverty through employment is severely out of step with economic reality. The additional challenges that youth experiencing homelessness face, such as poor access to education or discrimination on the basis of class, make it even harder to find gainful employment. Faced with these difficulties, it is unsurprising that some youth feel forced (or coerced) into sex work or drug dealing in order to survive (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002).

To provide youth who are homeless with viable employment opportunities, we need to ensure that these young people have all the advantages that housed youth have when seeking employment:

a safe home, educational and training opportunities, supportive peers and adults, and the flexibility to fail without risking their safety, security, or housing (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2013). It is also essential that social assistance rates are livable and social assistance is accessible for youth who cannot obtain employment, for whatever reason. To be effective, youth across Canada have told us that homelessness prevention must reduce these barriers and prioritize livable wages and social assistance rates.



## 1.2 LACK OF HOUSING

While youth viewed housing as necessary for their safety, security, and participation in society, many described childhoods of precarious housing and poverty. In some cases this was combined with addiction, abuse, disability, and/or mental health issues within the family, all challenges made worse by housing pressures. Forced to choose between rent and food, many parents or caregivers were unable to properly feed or clothe their children.

*"It sucks being in that position; you're homeless, and the first thing you need is a job, because how do you pay a house deposit? Well you need money! How do you get money? Work!"*

EDMONTON YOUTH

The lack of safe and affordable housing becomes a particularly significant problem for youth who can no longer remain in their caregivers' home.

*"They should force the developers to make some affordable housing [...] not just the luxury condos. It needs to be proportionate. You can't take away affordable housing and not put something to compensate what you're taking away from the community."*

TORONTO YOUTH

For many, childhood experiences of neglect, abuse, and housing insecurity forced them out on the street at a young age. Many were kicked out, while others left because it was safer to be homeless than to be at home. Like their peers, youth involved in the child welfare system reported histories of housing precarity and neglect – moving frequently between foster homes and group homes, constantly unsure of where they would be living next. This instability was compounded by ineffective transitions from care for many youth, increasing their risk of homelessness.

Youth across the country reported that once they were on their own, it was extremely difficult to find housing. Youth particularly emphasized the interdependency between housing, employment, and education, explaining that having no housing made it difficult to remain in school or get a job. For many, the cycle of housing precarity that began in the childhood continued in adolescence – but now they were on their own.

*“They were saying that the waitlist was going to be like, 3 months and if you’re homeless, you don’t want to wait like 3 months to get a place ...You want a place that you can feel secure and be stable and not being on like, ‘Is somebody going to come rob me? Or shank me while I’m sleeping on the street?’ You don’t want to worry about getting murdered. You want to feel safe.”*

ST. JOHN’S YOUTH

## Rental Market Challenges

Obtaining rental housing was extremely difficult for youth and their families in many communities across Canada. In major cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary, youth discussed the high cost of rent, low vacancy rates, and lack of affordable housing. In smaller communities there was very little housing to rent, and some youth from Northern and rural communities were forced to move to try to find housing. Youth in large urban centres identified gentrification, developer speculation, and condominium development as severely impacting the availability of affordable housing.

When seeking housing on their own, youth particularly struggled with being unable to meet the requirements landlords often demanded, including references, ID, a good credit score, proof of employment, no history of evictions, and/or a co-signer. In many cases youth were unable to obtain the funds to pay two months rent up front, plus the damage deposit required in some provinces/territories. These challenges were further amplified by landlord discrimination on the basis of class, age, gender, and race.

Many youth felt that landlords did not want to rent to a person their age or anyone on social assistance.



## Public Housing Challenges

The lack of available public housing, and youth housing specifically, was seen as a major driver of homelessness for youth and their families. Youth who grew up in poverty discussed the challenges their parents or caregivers faced in accessing public housing, and some indicated there was no public housing available in their communities.

*“I didn’t fit the certain criteria—they were like, ‘Well, you’re in a house,’ and I was like, ‘Okay, well I’m in a house but I don’t eat every day, I don’t go to school, I don’t... and they’re were like, ‘Well, we can’t do anything about it.’”*

YELLOWKNIFE YOUTH

### **Youth also explained that they frequently didn’t qualify for public housing because they did not meet particular criteria, including because they were not assessed to be sufficiently “at risk” or “in need.”**

Youth recounted stories of being turned away from public or youth housing because they were couch-surfing or had a roof over their head, even if they were experiencing neglect, violence, had difficulty getting to school, or didn’t have enough to eat.

Youth particularly emphasized that access to public housing often requires youth to be homeless for a significant length of time, in effect condemning youth to experiences of hardship, violence, and trauma before being able to access housing. Even when youth were able to obtain rental housing, it was often of poor quality and precarious. Youth reported histories of evictions due to roommates failing to pay rent, rent increases, or because they lacked the life skills or supports to maintain the unit. These histories of evictions further blocked youth from obtaining housing in the future.

*“‘Oh, you’re couch-surfing? Oh, that means you have a safe place to go tonight.’ NO, THAT DOESN’T. When I went to [agency], they said I haven’t been homeless long enough.”*

CALGARY YOUTH

# ADDRESSING LACK OF HOUSING: Youth's Proposed Solutions

## Policy & System Change

- Protect existing affordable rental housing and regulate housing development and speculation
- Require housing developers to build affordable housing within any new development and replace any affordable units they destroy
- Require housing developers to build mixed-income housing and neighbourhoods
- Reduce acuity criteria for accessing public and youth housing
- Reduce waitlists for public housing
- Work with landlords to reduce, navigate, or remove requirements needed to access rental housing
- Do not predicate access to youth housing on mandatory attendance in programs, school, or employment
- Ensure housing options are responsive to “youth’s different histories, needs, and circumstances” (Guelph Youth)

## Investments

- Build and expand affordable housing for youth and their families, offering a range of housing models to meet the needs of diverse youth, including POC youth, LGBTQ2S+ youth, Indigenous youth, and youth in rural or remote communities
- Given that young men reported facing discrimination in the rental housing market on the basis of gender and age, youth recommended building co-op housing for young men at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness
- Increase the availability of rent subsidies to youth and their families

## Professional Conduct & Training

- Penalize landlords for not maintaining safe, adequate, and clean housing
- Penalize landlords for discrimination on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, age, or source of income

## Interventions

- Provide housing supports to youth and their families before they become homeless
- Provide free legal aid, supports, and advocacy for youth with respect to housing issues
- Increase supports for youth seeking housing, including through the provision of inventories of landlords who rent to youth and hands-on, concrete supports to help youth obtain housing (e.g., accompanying youth to view apartments)
- Support young people to furnish their homes and develop a sense of ownership of the space following experiences of homelessness

## MOVING FORWARD

The solutions proposed by youth emphasize something we have known for a long time: we cannot prevent youth homelessness without significantly increasing the affordability and availability of housing for all Canadians. However, prevention requires more than this. Youth across Canada are pleading that we act now to remove the administrative and bureaucratic barriers to accessing public housing – policies, requirements, and criteria that condemn youth and their families to poverty and homelessness until they are considered to be sufficiently “in need” to deserve housing. Our current approach to addressing housing need is so poor that one Calgary youth explained, “Education is hard to get because housing is hard to get. What’s easy is being a prostitute and selling drugs.”

As we think about youth homelessness prevention in Canada, we must build a housing system that makes it easier, not harder, for youth to remain safe and engaged in school or employment. This means ensuring we provide housing to youth before they lose their housing, rather than wait until they are homeless and on the street. As we seek to offer a safe, affordable, and appropriate housing system for youth and their families, it is essential that the housing models we use for youth are specific to their unique needs and desires, founded on principles of youth voice, youth choice, and self-determination. A range of housing options is outlined in [THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide](#).

*“To access BC housing or any youth rent subsidies, you have to be homeless for a minimum of six months before they’ll even look at you. Six months is a long time. And there’s no need for any youth to go through that just to get a house. Cause some of them can make it through that time period, but some can’t.”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

*“Well, my mom was homeless – on the verge of being homeless back in November... We called [friend] afterward because we didn’t know what to do ... And [friend] said that you’re going to have to lie and say that you’re on some kind of hard drug to get anywhere. And to me, that was disgusting. How at risk does somebody – whether they’re disabled, a Person of Colour, anything – how at risk do they have to be to qualify for assistance?”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

# 1.3 COLONIZATION

Youth linked the homelessness of Indigenous youth to historic and contemporary forms of colonialism, embedded within multiple systems and structures. Several youth contrasted their own poverty, and the poverty of their community, to the land, wealth, and housing that settlers continue to accumulate at the expense of Indigenous Peoples.

*“Colonization, like if that didn’t happen I feel like I would be so good.”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

## One youth explicitly stated that if colonization hadn’t occurred, he wouldn’t have become homeless.

*“Police are AWFUL towards the Aboriginal people. It’s almost like the police believe they’re guilty before the trial. So, then you get police that go ahead and arrest the Aboriginal people and then they end up in jail and they end up with a criminal record on them and work becomes harder to find.”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

Youth felt that racism towards Indigenous Peoples was very common, and that it contributed to poverty and homelessness by blocking access to the benefits, supports, services, education, employment, and housing that many other young people are able to access. This racism was viewed as happening at all levels of society. At the systems level, youth particularly highlighted racism in the rental housing market, staff or worker racism in the child welfare system, and police practices that target and criminalize Indigenous Peoples. At the structural level, youth commented that housing, education, and social services within Indigenous communities and on reserves are severely underfunded, with some even lacking access to clean drinking water. Importantly, youth framed these inequities as *human rights violations*.

Youth also discussed intergenerational trauma within their family, describing the roots of familial conflict, abuse, and addiction as colonial. Some young people identified this family trauma as the direct cause of their own homelessness, explaining that fleeing family violence made it difficult to stay connected to their cultural roots, history, community, and way of life. Youth who grew up in isolated Indigenous communities or on reserves explained they lacked access to adequate supports or services that would have helped, such as family mediation, and were forced to leave their communities in search of help. Some youth described this disconnection from Indigenous heritage, culture, and community as deeply painful and disorienting.



*“Well, for me, like, because of residential school and because of the effect it had on my family, I’ve had a lot of traumatic experiences in my family, and thus, affecting every generation. And, because I haven’t learned my own culture I’ve learned this region’s culture instead of my own, and feeling lost and feeling alone, really.”*

**YELLOWKNIFE YOUTH**

# ADDRESSING COLONIZATION: Youth's Proposed Solutions

## Policy & System Change

- Develop a youth homelessness prevention strategy specific to Indigenous youth
- Protect the human rights of all Indigenous Peoples, including the right to clean drinking water, medical care, education, housing, and the right to live free of violence
- Protect and respect Indigenous Peoples' rights to self-determination, self-governance, and autonomy
- Elect more Indigenous leaders to positions of power within all levels of government
- Ensure political leaders listen to Indigenous youth and respond urgently to the issues they face
- Provide Indigenous youth with opportunities to concretely engage in political decision making
- Hire Indigenous staff at youth-serving organizations

## Investments

- Build enough affordable and safe housing for Indigenous youth and their families to eliminate housing need
- Increase funding for Indigenous supports, services, and community centres, including Friendship Centres, in communities across Canada (particularly in rural communities)
- Increase funding for, and availability of, social services in Indigenous communities and on reserves, including specifically remote Indigenous communities
- Provide funding and opportunities for Elders to work with Indigenous youth

## Professional Conduct & Training

- Dismantle staff and institutional bias against Indigenous youth and their families within the child welfare system
- Train all public systems workers in cultural competency and trauma-informed care

## Interventions

- Increase the availability of housing and support programs targeted to Indigenous youth
- Increase the availability of peer mentorship programs for Indigenous youth
- Provide opportunities for Indigenous youth to go on cultural journeys, for which they should receive educational credits
- Increase the availability of cultural resources and spaces for youth to learn about local Indigenous histories and traditions
- Provide culturally appropriate and no-cost family mediation services for Indigenous families
- Offer education on Indigenous culture and history in schools and social services across Canada, including opportunities for youth to learn about their own ancestry
- Provide immediate and no-cost counselling to anyone experiencing intergenerational trauma, ensuring very minimal wait times
- Provide ongoing opportunities for Indigenous youth to learn about and engage with their cultural traditions and history, rather than single events or workshops
- Ensure that Indigenous youth who may be disconnected from family have opportunities to connect with their culture and history
- Provide opportunities for Indigenous youth to connect with Elders, who can help the young person "connect the past to the present" (Vancouver Youth)

## MOVING FORWARD

Indigenous youth viewed their experiences of homelessness as part of the long legacy of colonial violence and marginalization experienced by their families, communities, and Peoples. This means that if we are serious about preventing youth homelessness, we must be serious about addressing colonialism.

*“Even when you can can’t connect to family, you should still have access to culture.”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

## Many Indigenous youth highlighted the importance of providing spaces and opportunities for Indigenous youth to connect with their history, culture, ancestry, and traditions.

*“I’ve changed a lot of youth’s lives. A lot of them were going down a bad path ... Now I see them on a different path . . . Most of the youth I worked with participated in everything we’ve done with Elders and Chiefs ... Last year ... we went and showed a lot of youth sacred village sites and all that. It impacted them, and it kind of impacted me, ‘cause it made me feel good that I helped out youth in those situations.”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH,  
LEADER IN AN INDIGENOUS PEER  
MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

This finding echoes the [Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada](#), which articulates that Indigenous homelessness involves isolation from “relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities” (Thistle, 2017, p.6).

Youth also emphasized that preventing youth homelessness must involve the significant redistribution of resources and power. When asked who is responsible for preventing youth homelessness, one Vancouver youth expressed, “The old white guys who control and have power over everything in the world.” This comment reflects how severely disempowered many Indigenous youth across the country feel, and how far we have to go to achieve equity, human rights, and self-determination for Indigenous Peoples. The principles and [Calls to Action](#) identified by the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) provide a guide for this work.

# 1.4 INEQUITY & DISCRIMINATION

Young people reported experiencing inequity and discrimination in various parts of their lives, both before and after becoming homeless. Some youth experienced this inequity alongside their family or community (e.g., poor medical care on Indigenous reserves), while others had personal experiences (e.g., being turned down for a job because of their sexual orientation). Some discrimination was overt, such as police profiling. In other cases, youth felt that discrimination was more insidious, such as when agency's forms or documents are not accessible to youth with disabilities. Youth often experienced multiple forms of discrimination and inequity at the same time, and these experiences often layered together with structural factors and systems failures to create barriers to escaping poverty and homelessness.



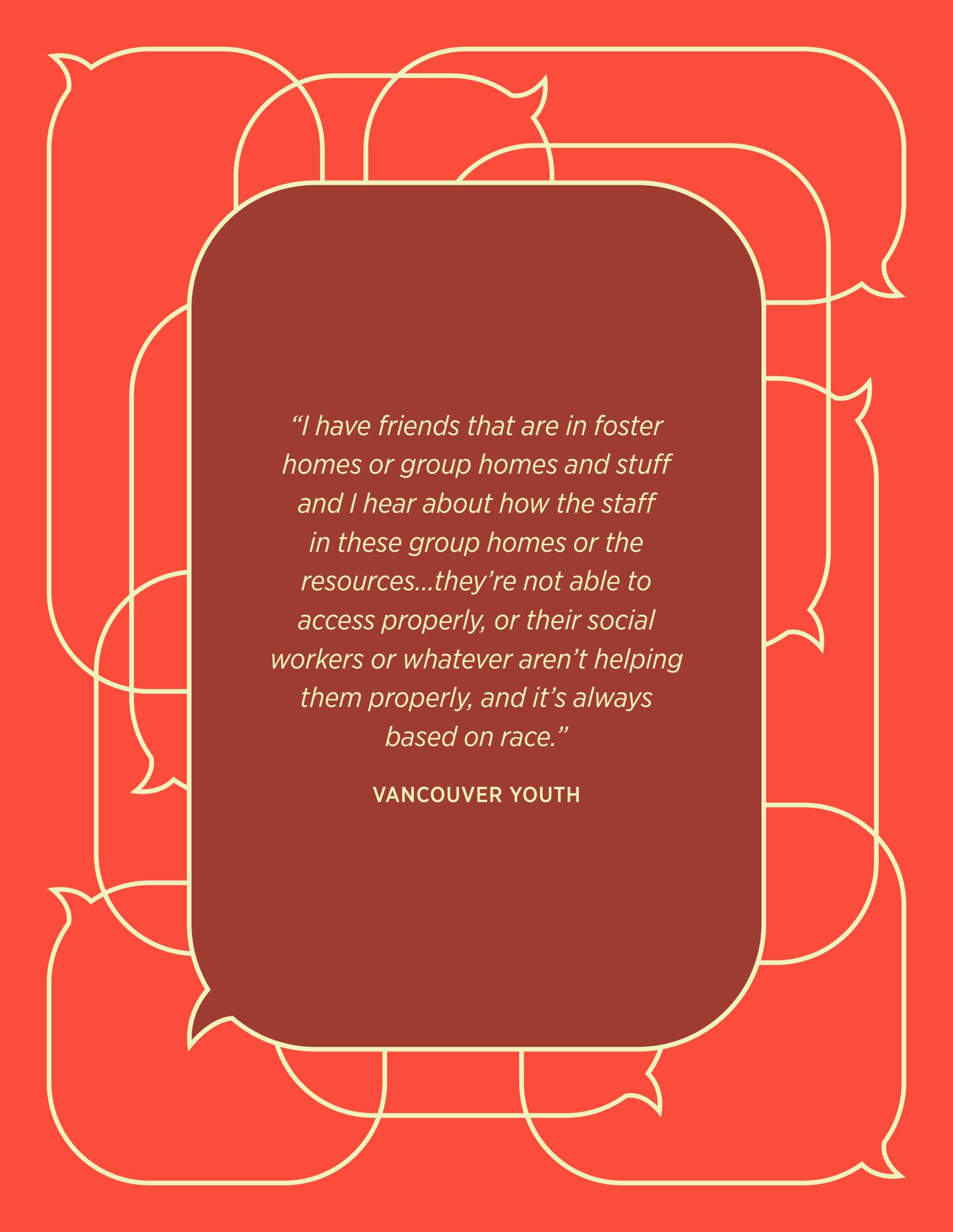
*"In my experience, when people find out, 'Oh, you're disabled,' they don't really want to hire you because they have to make all these other expenses on the company and therefore, 'you're going to be more of a hassle than a help to my company. So, I can't hire you.'"*

ST. JOHN'S YOUTH

One of the most painful subjects for youth was experiences of discrimination from professionals who were supposed to help them, such as nurses, social workers, and staff at shelters and social services. Many youth described experiences of professionals discriminating against them on the basis of age, disability, race, or mental health status. This was a particularly common theme among youth in the child welfare system, some of whom reported being left in abusive and neglectful homes because their social worker didn't believe them due to their disability, age, or mental health diagnosis. Youth described these experiences as deeply hurtful betrayals of trust.

## Youth also frequently discussed being discriminated against on the basis of class.

Youth were frequently turned away from jobs and housing because they were receiving social assistance or living in a shelter, and some discussed their struggles to even exist in public spaces without experiencing discrimination because they appeared poor.



*“I have friends that are in foster homes or group homes and stuff and I hear about how the staff in these group homes or the resources...they’re not able to access properly, or their social workers or whatever aren’t helping them properly, and it’s always based on race.”*

**VANCOUVER YOUTH**

## **ADDRESSING INEQUITY & DISCRIMINATION: Youth's Proposed Solutions**

### **Policy & System Change**

- Make services and supports in all systems easier to access for youth with disabilities
- Ensure that services and supports for youth with disabilities are guided by what youth want and how they want to achieve their goals
- Prohibit services, shelters and drop-ins from banning any youth on the basis of their identity or challenges they face (including LGBTQ2S+ youth and youth facing mental health or addiction challenges)
- Establish accountability mechanisms within systems to identify and address discrimination and inequity, and involve youth in these assessments

### **Investments**

- Only fund services and programs whose policies and practices are inclusive of all groups accessing services (e.g. LGBTQ2S+ youth) and who employ inclusionary hiring practices

### **Professional Conduct & Training**

- Penalize landlords and employers for discrimination and develop accountability mechanisms so landlords and employers cannot continue to harm youth
- Provide ongoing anti-discrimination, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, and cultural competency training for all professionals working with youth (e.g., teachers, social workers)
- Provide landlords and employers training on anti-oppression and how to best work with youth

### **Interventions**

- Provide employment and training programs for youth who face discrimination on the basis of mental health status and/or disability

## MOVING FORWARD

While youth described inequity and discrimination across many areas of their lives, a haunting finding of this study was the frequency with which young people who are homeless encounter discrimination in the systems designed to help them - the child welfare system, the healthcare system, the youth homelessness sector, and others. These findings mirror other research in these areas, demonstrating that homeless youth's experiences of discrimination on the basis of class creates barriers to accessing supports, services, justice, entitlements, and basic human rights (Barker, Kerr, Nguyen, Wood, & DeBeck, 2015; Boyd, Fast & Small, 2015; Patrick, 2014).

**Youth described reaching out to people in these systems, desperate for support, only to feel further victimized, marginalized, silenced, or stigmatized by professionals.**

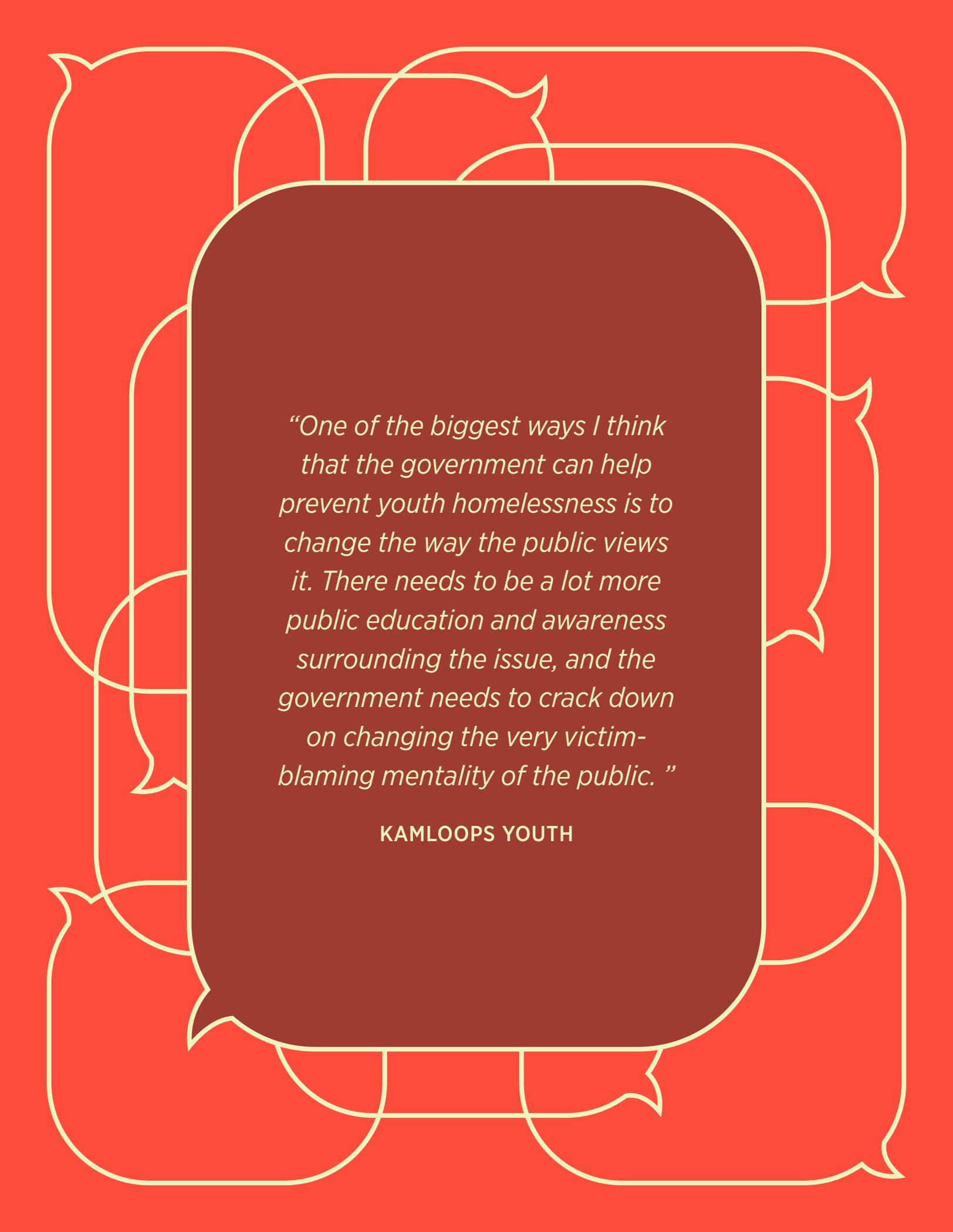
On top of this, youth described institutional policies and practices that made it hard for youth facing systemic oppression or unique challenges (e.g., addictions) to get their basic needs met, despite their best efforts. In light of these experiences, it is unsurprising that some youth avoid services, shelters, and even outreach at all costs.

It is an ethical imperative that we identify and systemically dismantle discriminatory policies, practices, rules, and approaches across the systems that youth touch.

These findings identify a need for improved training and education for professionals working in these systems to better understand, respect, and support diverse youth who are facing challenges or at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

*“Also, the Ministry [of Children and Youth services] having better trust in what disabled people are saying that are happening at home because ... the Ministry will go in and investigate but, like, if the kid's disabled, they'll always take the parent's words over it [abuse]. And I know that that's not just me. Like, lots of people I know who had diagnoses would just get ignored because they had a diagnosis.”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH



*“One of the biggest ways I think that the government can help prevent youth homelessness is to change the way the public views it. There needs to be a lot more public education and awareness surrounding the issue, and the government needs to crack down on changing the very victim-blaming mentality of the public.”*

**KAMLOOPS YOUTH**

# 1.5 HARMFUL SOCIETAL BELIEFS & VALUES

**According to many young people, the perpetuation of homelessness in Canada is linked to widely held beliefs and values about poverty and the welfare state.**

Several youth expressed that it is difficult to end youth homelessness in Canada because the public often blames youth for their poverty, views homelessness as a personal choice, and believes in stereotypes about people who are homeless (e.g., all people who are homeless are lazy). Several youth felt that these views make it difficult to implement the policy and system changes needed to prevent homelessness.

Youth also discussed how homelessness in Canada is influenced by public perceptions of the welfare state and social programs. Many youth felt that at a values level, Canadian society prioritizes profits over the needs of those who are marginalized. Several youth expressed that major shifts in Canadian society's values and beliefs are needed in order to enact the political change that can prevent youth homelessness, and that public education is required to do this.

*"The way that they look at you when you walk past, the way that they treat you and the way that they make you feel – there's such a stigma of being homeless. You can't go into certain stores if you have a backpack. Well, where the heck are they supposed to put it? That's their house. Where else are they supposed to go? They can't go into certain libraries or washrooms ... And there were places that they couldn't go because they weren't trusted, because there's a stigma on homeless people. Well, maybe if we remove the stigma and allow them to ... feel like it's safe, regardless if there are getting beaten up and getting pissed on in the middle of the night, they want to feel safe somewhere."*

CALGARY YOUTH

## ADDRESSING HARMFUL SOCIETAL VALUES & BELIEFS: Youth's Proposed Solutions

### Policy & System Change

- Provide public education and awareness campaigns on the importance of social welfare policies and programs
- Run public awareness campaigns that describe the real causes of youth homelessness, and what happens when youth become homeless
- Increase media coverage of youth homelessness and the challenges youth face when homeless

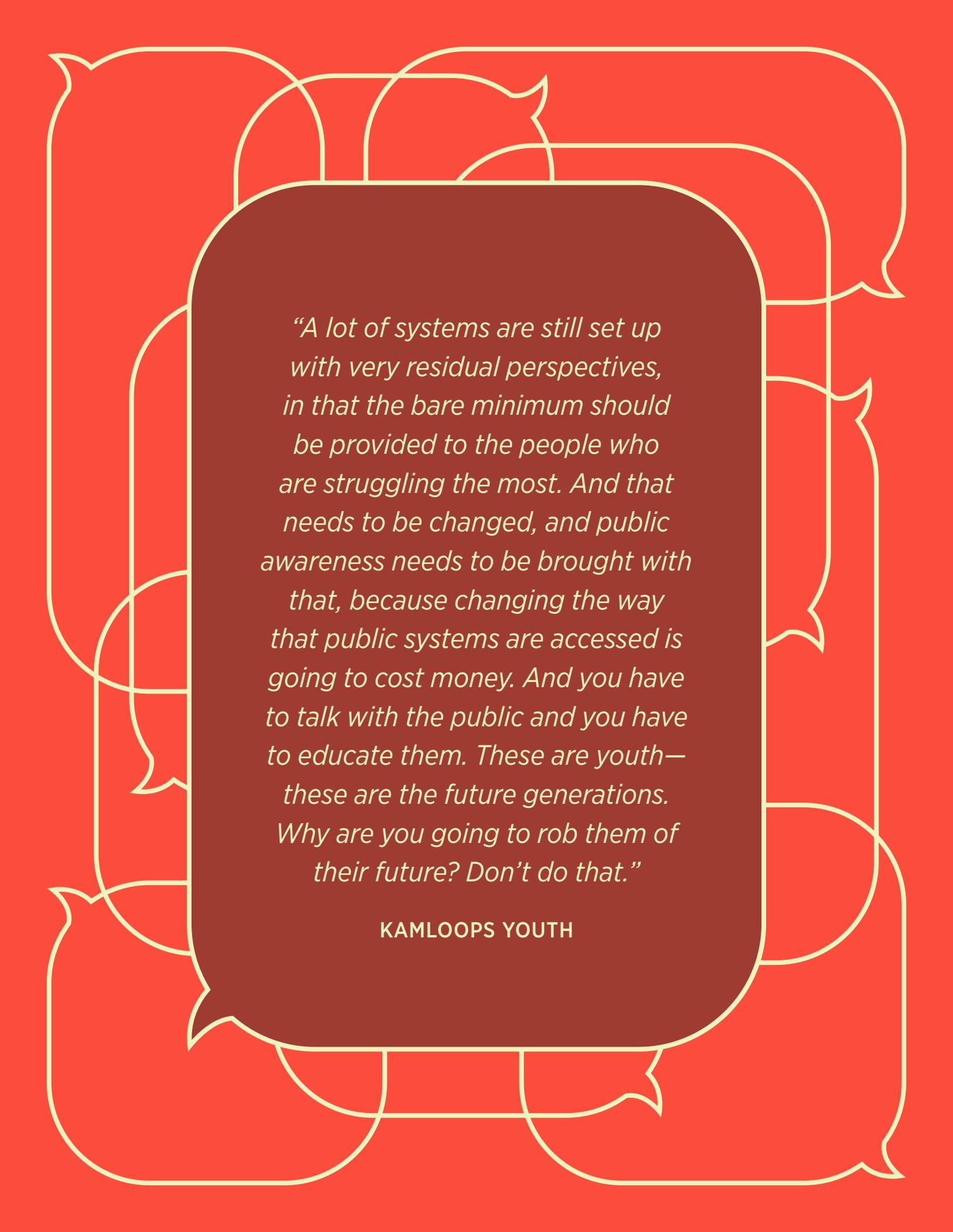
### Interventions

- Offer education on homelessness and poverty in schools, aiming to increase students' understandings of the issue and empathy towards people experiencing homelessness
- Create opportunities for youth who are homeless to share their experiences with the public in order to shift public attitudes

## MOVING FORWARD

As youth across the country point out, undoing the broad cultural and societal beliefs about homelessness, poverty, and the welfare state is tough work. Scholars have demonstrated that for centuries, people experiencing homelessness have been depicted as morally inferior and lazy (the “deprivation” narrative), to blame for their misfortune (the “choice” narrative), and as potential criminals in need of confinement and punishment (the “criminality” narrative) (Sylvestre & Bellot, 2014). These beliefs are embedded within many domains of society, including how cities are planned, how citizens are taxed, and how our social safety net operates. Ontario's [Safe Streets Act](#) (1999), for instance, is arguably an example of harmful policy that legislates the social exclusion of people based upon such narratives.

Youth articulated that education is a key strategy for dismantling the harmful beliefs and value systems that stigmatize and blame people experiencing homelessness, blocking positive social change. Youth particularly emphasized the importance of public education campaigns, early education efforts, and centering the voices of young people with experiences of homelessness in education efforts. Given that these beliefs and values are linked to discrimination and violence, consistent legislative action that penalizes bias-based policies, practices, and violence can provide important “legal teeth” to back up educational and community-based efforts.



*“A lot of systems are still set up with very residual perspectives, in that the bare minimum should be provided to the people who are struggling the most. And that needs to be changed, and public awareness needs to be brought with that, because changing the way that public systems are accessed is going to cost money. And you have to talk with the public and you have to educate them. These are youth—these are the future generations. Why are you going to rob them of their future? Don’t do that.”*

**KAMLOOPS YOUTH**

# 1.6 ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Research has shown that young people experiencing homelessness often face significant adversity prior to becoming homeless, such as childhood abuse and neglect. These traumas are often referred to as “adverse childhood experiences”(ACEs), and have been shown to be a key social determinant of health. Ten key types of ACEs have been identified in research literatures as impacting children’s development and physical, social, mental, emotional, and behavioural health and well-being (including physical abuse, sexual abuse, household substance abuse, and household mental illness).

In consultations with youth across the country, it was evident that many young people experienced more than one of these forms of adversity in their childhood and adolescence. In many cases youth described these experiences as occurring over many years, and as repeated throughout their lives. As discussed below, this adversity sometimes continued in public systems (e.g., physical abuse in foster care, violent victimization in the emergency shelter system). Importantly, youth identified that professionals in various systems (e.g., teachers, social workers, frontline staff at emergency shelters) sometimes made the effects of these ACE’s worse by ignoring or discounting their experiences, blaming or stigmatizing them, or excluding them from supports or benefits that would have helped them deal with these challenges.

In some cases this adversity was occurring not just within the home or a public system, it was occurring within a youth’s community as well (e.g., gang violence, police profiling of poor youth). Youth discussed the severe effects of these experiences on their mental health and well-being, and the difficult choices they were forced to make when trying to escape violence, neglect, and family conflict. Youth’s options for dealing with adversity were often severely constrained by other structural factors that increased their risk of homelessness, such as lack of housing and poverty.

*“I wasn’t aware of how bad it was at home, and there was also that guilt that like, oh, it was my problem, I can’t leave home, I can’t become homeless. So, I’d be like, ‘No, no, no, it’s fine, I can work it out.’ But I think you can bypass that sort of instinctual sort of, ‘Oh, it’s not that bad’ if you’re able to tell the kid, ‘Well, listen, let’s put you on the waiting list for three months or so, and in three months, we’ll revisit it. If you’re still not in a good place, I can take you off it or we can go ahead with it.’ Because I think for a lot of kids, there’s a manipulation of abuse there, where we would be ... like, bad, if they were say, ‘Oh, it IS bad at home.’”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

## **ADDRESSING ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES: Youth's Proposed Solutions**

### **Policy & System Change**

- Improve the monitoring of foster homes and group homes to better identify abuse and neglect
- Ensure all police adequately and appropriately respond to all reports of abuse and neglect, and do not leave children and youth exposed to violence
- Enable youth to access safe emergency housing and services without abusive caregivers being alerted to where they are

### **Investments**

- Build more safe houses for youth experiencing abuse

### **Professional Conduct & Training**

- Improve training and education for social workers, teachers, doctors, and medical staff on how to appropriately identify and respond to young people experiencing abuse or neglect

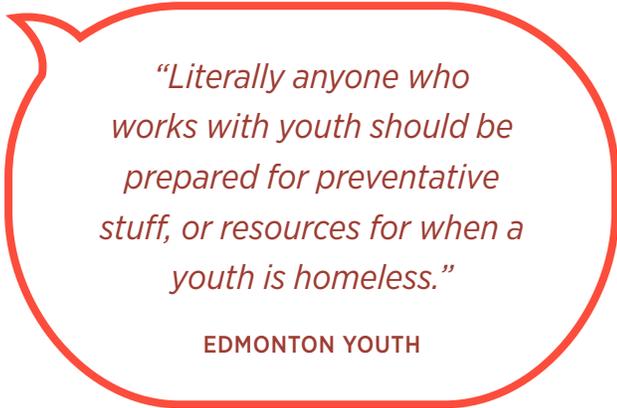
### **Interventions**

- Provide free counselling, life skills education, family mediation, and casework supports to caregivers struggling with parenting, including foster families
- Provide caregivers with workers who can support them to improve their parenting
- Educate caregivers on alternatives to kicking youth out of their home
- Increase the availability of drug management programs and mental health services for caregivers
- Provide school-based education to all youth on how to identify abuse and neglect within their home
- Provide immediate, free counselling to all youth who have experienced abuse and neglect

## MOVING FORWARD

Research has shown that ACEs profoundly affect a child's ability to develop and learn, with the resultant toxic stress often derailing the healthy development of the brain (Anda et al., 2006). Within the homelessness literature, [national data](#) indicates that young people that experience adversity prior to becoming homeless are more likely to experience poorer mental health, suicide attempts, a lower quality of life, and negative psychological resilience than youth that did not have these experiences (Kidd et al., 2017). Importantly, as ACEs accumulate for young people, their chances of experiencing both homelessness and mental health challenges increase (Montgomery et al., 2013; Novac, 2007). ACEs have been identified as a major public health problem that require primary and secondary prevention efforts. This is a particularly urgent concern for Indigenous youth, many of whom experience high levels of ACEs and intergenerational trauma due to the transmission of historical oppression and its negative consequences across generations (Patrick, 2014).

Adversity can be reduced by building healthy communities and ensuring that families have the resources they need to thrive.



*“Literally anyone who works with youth should be prepared for preventative stuff, or resources for when a youth is homeless.”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

This means that as a society, we must provide the conditions for caregivers to be able to support their children and provide nutritious food, safe and adequate housing, good quality childcare and healthcare, access to education and transportation, and opportunities for recreation, growth, friendship, and social inclusion.

## 2. SYSTEMS PREVENTION

When young people were asked what would have prevented their homelessness, many youth traced these experiences back to system failures. Systems failures refer to situations in which inadequate policy and service delivery within and between systems contribute to homelessness for young people. Importantly, many youth felt that systems change is where prevention efforts could be most effective. Youth identified clear policies, practices, and approaches in all systems that could dramatically reduce a young person's chance of becoming homeless.



Youth identified five systems that are in a position to prevent youth homelessness: education, child welfare, healthcare and addictions services, the youth homelessness sector, and the criminal justice system. Youth experienced similar problems in many of these systems. Shared problems included:

- Difficulty accessing services in one system often made it hard to access services in another system. As a result, system failures were often mutually reinforcing in young people's lives.
- The qualifying criteria for supports, services, or benefits were often too high or age specific, leaving many youth unable to access help.
- Youth were often obliged to meet particular requirements or expectations to receive services (e.g., checking in with a youth shelter twice each day in order to access a bed that night). Youth described these requirements as complex, frequent, hard to understand, and hard to navigate.
- Awareness, availability, and appropriateness of services were issues in all systems, sometimes leaving youth with nowhere to turn for help.
- Youth often lacked the practical tools and resources required to access supports (e.g., identification, transit fare), and youth under 16 were often unable to access help without parental permission.
- Experiences of inequity and discrimination were common in all systems, particularly based on race, class, disability, sexuality and mental health status.
- Youth consistently experienced challenges with staff and workers in multiple systems, including: neglect, lack of training, lack of care, discrimination, stigmatizing behaviour, and failures to respond to abuse and neglect appropriately or adequately.
- Services and systems were often poorly coordinated, making it difficult for youth to transition from one system or service to another.
- The complex, repetitive barriers that youth faced in multiple systems left them feeling hopeless, powerless, and alone.

The good news is that because these challenges are shared, we can go farther, faster, if we work together to learn from these collective difficulties. Likewise, because these systems are so linked, change in any system (e.g., increased funding for addiction services) may provide positive outcomes in other systems (e.g., reductions in youth entering the child welfare system). This means that to be successful, youth homelessness interventions must engage multiple departments and ministries across all levels of government. Municipal, provincial, territorial, and federal governments should foster integrated dialogue across departments and ministries to ensure the systemic barriers created by large systems can be broken down.

## 2.1 EDUCATION

For young people who lack stable housing or experience poverty, abuse, or neglect at home, remaining in school is very difficult. Without proper clothing, school supplies, transportation, or food, being able to pay attention and learn becomes challenging. Many young people reported that these challenges were made worse by school staff who were largely unprepared or underqualified to support them, limited school-based mental health supports, and curriculum that did not help them learn how to live independently and safely. In some cases, youth felt that school policies and staff actually increased their marginalization and risk of homelessness. Several youth reported instances where their teachers disclosed their mental health challenges to peers, did not help them escape abusive homes, stigmatized them for their drug use, or punished them for sleeping in class when they had nowhere safe to sleep at night.

*“At the end of the day, the bottom line is that the education system has not been changed in 50-some years ... You don’t learn what you need to learn. It is a place to keep you during the day. We need an education re-education. We need revamps, we need options.”*

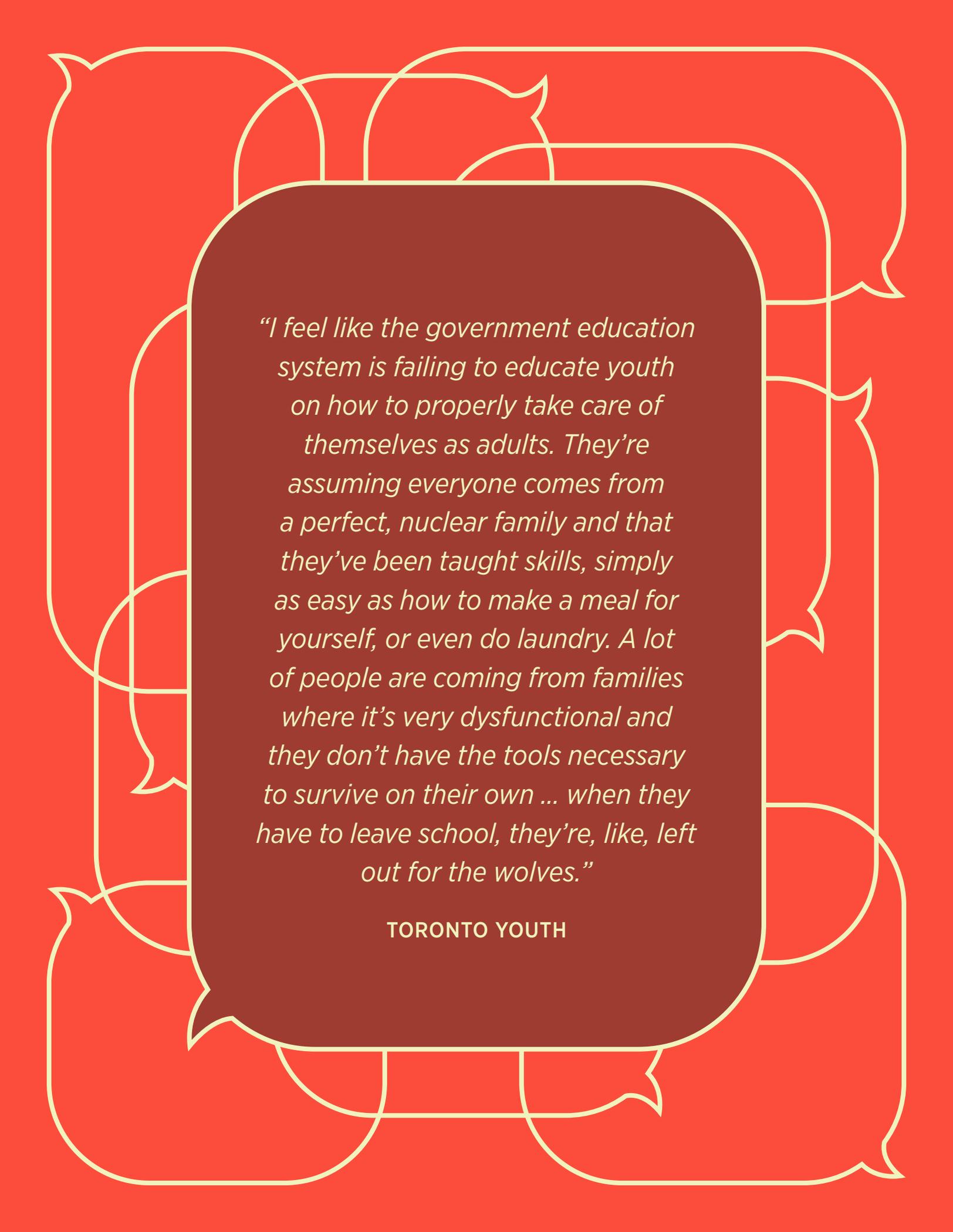
CALGARY YOUTH

### In focus groups across the country, youth agreed: schools are doing very little to prevent youth homelessness.

While youth identified failures within schools, they also felt that this institution had the *most potential* to engage in youth homelessness prevention. Youth identified opportunities for change in five areas:

#### 1. Curriculum Change

The need for curriculum change was a frequent topic in focus groups. Many youth felt that the current school curriculum does not prepare youth for independent living, assuming that all young people receive education on life skills at home. Young people also felt they lacked education on healthy relationships, how to identify abuse, mental health issues, or emotional skills, with some youth expressing this might have prevented their own homelessness. More broadly, several youth felt that the education system does not adequately prepare youth for the job market today.



*“I feel like the government education system is failing to educate youth on how to properly take care of themselves as adults. They’re assuming everyone comes from a perfect, nuclear family and that they’ve been taught skills, simply as easy as how to make a meal for yourself, or even do laundry. A lot of people are coming from families where it’s very dysfunctional and they don’t have the tools necessary to survive on their own ... when they have to leave school, they’re, like, left out for the wolves.”*

**TORONTO YOUTH**

## 2. Professional Training

For the most part, youth felt that teachers and school staff were not well trained to support youth going through issues such as homelessness, abuse, neglect, mental health challenges, or addictions. Young people explained that teachers and staff need improved training to better support young people in need, including an increased awareness of community resources available to youth and the ability to actively support youth to access them. Several youth also felt that some staff lacked the insight and empathy needed to support youth. Some youth reported that school staff actually further marginalized them or viewed them as a “bad kid,” giving up on them or making an example of them in front of their peers.

*“I was awful when I was a child, and I was placed into positions a lot of the time - the way it felt - the way I was being approached was not necessarily the way that’s looking out for me. It was like, “Is this kid going to continue to screw with us?” It’s like, it wasn’t thinking about my future. It was like, “Is he too much to handle?” ... They were writing me off - ‘cause I’ve been expelled seven times.”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

*“Teachers have to be understanding with what’s going on now. It’s not just crack cocaine ... It’s prostitution. It’s meth. It’s gangs. And kids are being intimidated and scared, and this is all happening in the main campus.”*

WINNIPEG YOUTH

## More broadly, several youth felt that school staff do not understand the social environments in which young people live.

Youth felt that without this understanding, teachers are more likely to interpret kids falling asleep at their desk or coming to class high as behavioral problems, rather than instances in which a youth was overcoming significant adversity in order to stay engaged in school.

## 3. Mental Health Supports

Mental health supports were viewed as severely lacking in school. In many cases there simply weren’t any mental health services provided, or they were very limited. A Vancouver youth explained, “They should have more counselors as well. I was in a public school of like 1,300, and we had one counselor.” Some youth also felt that counselors ignored or failed to respond to their concerns. Poor

connections between schools and community-based mental health services was also viewed as a problem, with youth commenting that they were often not connected to services in the community. Once again, staff were seen as lacking knowledge about these services.

#### 4. Awareness programs

A key theme in all focus groups with youth was that a vast majority of youth didn't know what services were available in their community, or how to access them. More broadly, youth discussed not even understanding that "youth homelessness" was a problem that existed, or something that could happen to them. Many youth felt that the education system was the most logical place for young people to learn about homelessness and what services were available, but felt that schools uniformly failed youth in this regard.

*"I don't think you want to tell a bunch of kids, 'Hey, if you get homeless, this is what to do,' but it kind of needs to be done. Kids need to know that life is hard, and that sometimes things go downhill, and you need to be prepared for that."*

EDMONTON YOUTH

#### 5. Implementing a 'Hub' Model Within Schools

Youth felt that many of the challenges they face could be effectively addressed within schools if schools functioned as "hubs" for supports and services. Youth discussed the merit of schools becoming a community hub for services and supports to navigate the child welfare system, learn life skills, address mental health and addiction issues, and be matched with a mentor or 'big brother/sister.' Centralizing these services within schools was seen as a way to reduce the risk that a young person might 'fall through the cracks' during referral processes, as well as a strategy for keeping youth engaged in school and connected to positive peers and adults.

## PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM: Youth's Proposed Solutions

### Policy & System Change

- Foster relationships and communication between schools and other systems and institutions, child welfare, Community Living, housing, and social services
- Implement methods to screen for, and provide immediate supports to, youth experiencing abuse, neglect, mental health challenges, addiction, and risk of homelessness within schools
- Create a system driven by youth's self-identified educational needs and desires, enabling youth with different learning styles to learn in ways that work for them
- Require that when schools identify students struggling with grades, attendance, or drug use, they are provided with immediate mental health assessments and supports, including housing supports
- Implement regular, mandatory check-ins with a school counselor for all students, with the provision that students can opt out and access alternative supports

## **Investments**

- Provide significantly increased funding for mental health services in all schools, provided by highly qualified professionals with training in cultural competency, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, empathy, and trauma-informed approaches
- Decrease class sizes and increase teachers' salaries

## **Professional Conduct & Training**

- Implement accountability mechanisms to ensure school counselors are appropriately and adequately responding to the needs of students (e.g., reporting abuse and neglect)
- Educate teachers on the challenges youth face in their daily lives (e.g., gangs, sex work)
- Educate all school staff on social services available in the community for youth, and provide all staff with the power and opportunity to refer youth to these services
- Train teachers on providing life skills education
- Train all school staff to identify signs of distress and abuse, and ensure staff quickly and accurately refer youth to appropriate supports

## **Interventions**

- Provide life skills education (e.g., classes, workshops, seminars) in all secondary schools to ensure all students leave school with basic life skills (e.g., taxes, paying bills, budgeting, cooking)
- Implement ongoing education for students on the existence of homelessness, what to do if they become homeless, the services available, and how to escape homelessness
- Educate students on their legal and human rights, including their rights in different contexts (e.g., tenant rights, workplace rights), and how to access legal supports if their rights are violated
- Educate students on how the government works so youth can engage in advocacy
- Implement school curriculum and programs that teach youth about healthy relationships, abuse, substance use and addiction (e.g., how to identify an overdose), and emotional development
- Offer field trips to social services in the community, and have social services give school presentations
- Integrate mental health education into schools in multiple ways, including within the curriculum and in extracurricular activities (e.g., sports)
- Offer flexible afterschool programming for students at risk of being expelled, ensuring that these youth can remain enrolled in school as long as they stay engaged with the program
- Post posters & flyers about community services and mental health services throughout schools
- Support schools and school boards to build a 'hub' mentality around their school environment to ensure youth can access what they need while they are there
- Provide opportunities for youth in schools to help establish school-based programs and policies

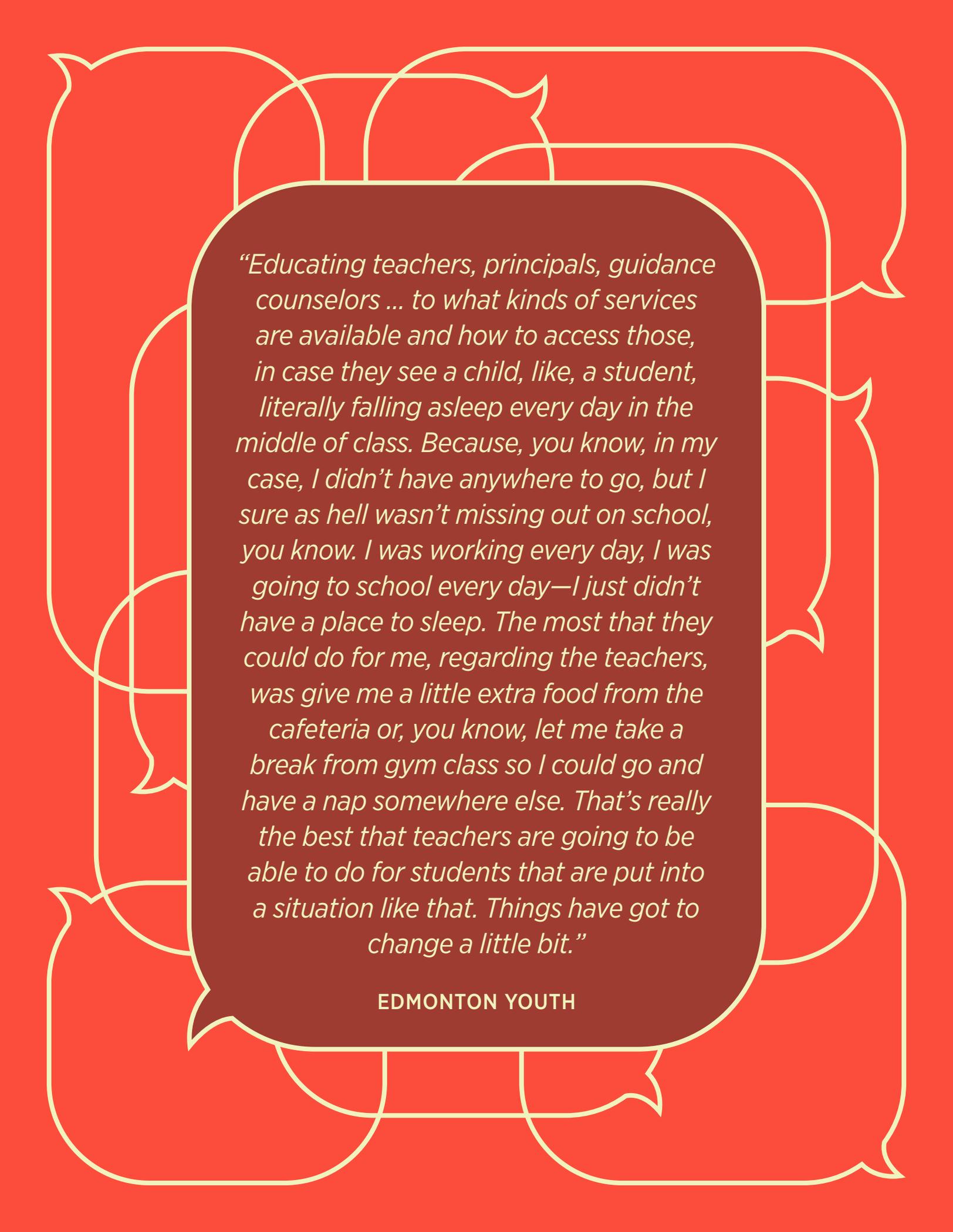
## MOVING FORWARD

According to young people across Canada, schools don't see themselves as playing a role in youth homelessness prevention – *but they should.*

*“Almost everyone has, like, the one teacher that they really trusted and liked, or the one school counsellor that was cool and not scary. So it would be nice if just they got this basic training and also like, signs to look out for. And like, how to approach a student and be like, “hey, you know, how’s everything at home, everything going okay?”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

It is clear that there are few processes in schools to identify youth who are experiencing abuse, going hungry, or experiencing homelessness, and that often schools have few strategies or resources to address these issues. Young people argued that because school is the primary institution in society that almost all young people interact with, it should be a primary site to implement preventative programs, services, and supports. We know that in order to do so, the education system will need significant financial investments from provincial and territorial ministries, as well as a focus on system integration to best support young people in need. By investing in improved teacher training, mental health supports, homelessness screening programs, and curriculum change, we may be able to not only prevent homelessness for young people, but also keep youth engaged in school who otherwise might have dropped out or been expelled.



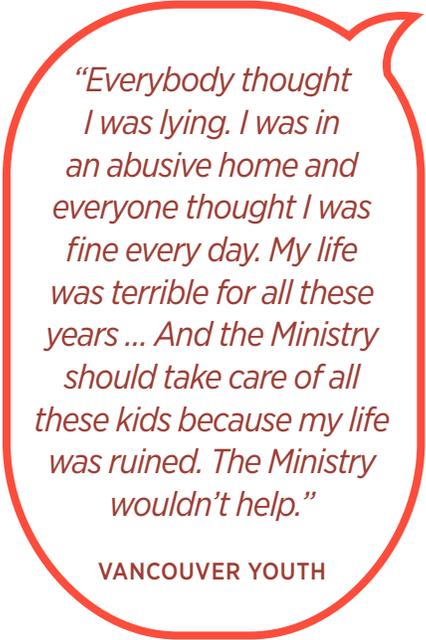
*“Educating teachers, principals, guidance counselors ... to what kinds of services are available and how to access those, in case they see a child, like, a student, literally falling asleep every day in the middle of class. Because, you know, in my case, I didn’t have anywhere to go, but I sure as hell wasn’t missing out on school, you know. I was working every day, I was going to school every day—I just didn’t have a place to sleep. The most that they could do for me, regarding the teachers, was give me a little extra food from the cafeteria or, you know, let me take a break from gym class so I could go and have a nap somewhere else. That’s really the best that teachers are going to be able to do for students that are put into a situation like that. Things have got to change a little bit.”*

**EDMONTON YOUTH**

## 2.2 CHILD WELFARE

Youth participants viewed the child welfare system as a crucial site for youth homelessness prevention. While many youth believed that child welfare policies and practices contribute to homelessness for young people, they were also optimistic about key ways that the system could be designed for youth homelessness prevention.

**Three key issues were raised in discussions about child welfare: abuse, experiences in foster care, and difficult transitions from care.**



*“Everybody thought I was lying. I was in an abusive home and everyone thought I was fine every day. My life was terrible for all these years ... And the Ministry should take care of all these kids because my life was ruined. The Ministry wouldn’t help.”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

### Abuse

Abuse is both a precursor to child welfare involvement, and an experience within the child welfare system, according to young people across Canada. With respect to abuse and neglect from caregivers, young people were divided as to whether and how the child welfare system should become involved. Some young people were adamant that child welfare services should try to keep young people in their homes, and provide families with supports, mediation, and counselling. Others felt strongly that the child welfare system failed them by privileging a “keep families together” philosophy, and that workers refusal to respond to their abuse was profoundly damaging and contributed to their homelessness.

A crucial finding was that many youth felt that their child welfare worker(s) didn’t believe them, or chose to ignore them, when they reported experiences of abuse, neglect, and dangerous home environments. Youth reported that caregivers and foster families were often able to convince workers that abuse was not taking place, and that workers frequently viewed them as liars, manipulators, or attention seeking. Several youth felt that workers were even less likely to believe youth with mental health issues or disabilities. Recounting these experiences of not being believed or listened to was very painful for some youth, and many young people were desperate for change in this area.

## Experiences in Foster Care

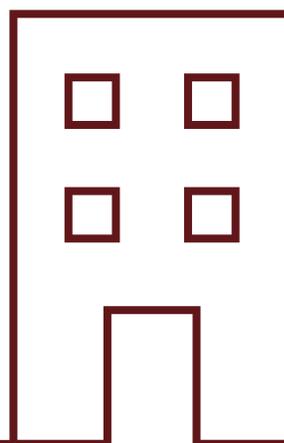
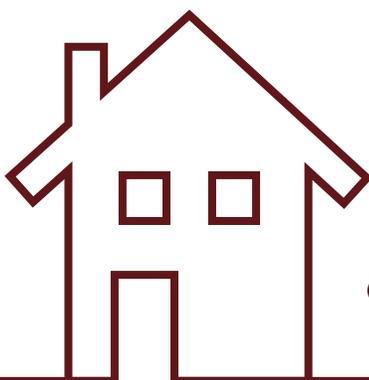
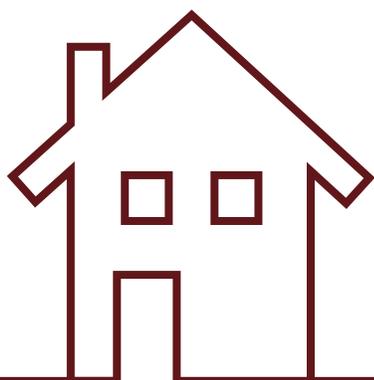
Many youth who are homeless have histories of foster care involvement, and youth in this study were no exception. Several concerns about foster care were raised by youth, including that foster families were only providing care because it's profitable. Many youth also described foster families as abusive, neglectful, or manipulative.

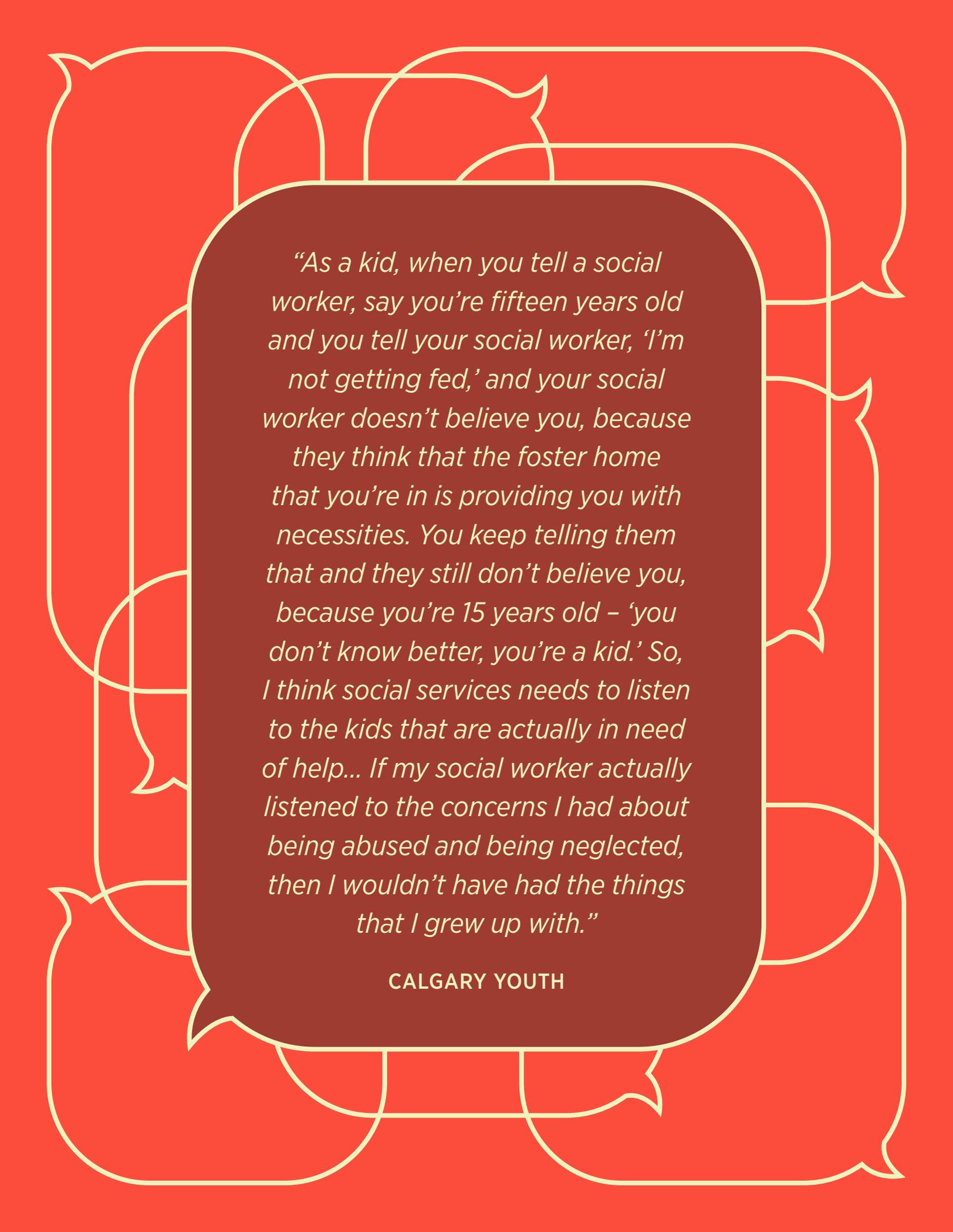
### Youth reported being moved from home to home frequently, and that foster parents would use the threat of being moved to “keep the child’s mouth shut” (Calgary Youth).

*“I wouldn’t get abused, but they [my siblings] would...I know it wasn’t just my foster home; it’s a lot of foster homes. A lot of youth would rather be homeless than end up in a foster home, because at least if they’re on the streets they’re not getting abused.”*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

Fortunately, several youth described having extremely supportive foster care families that helped them remain healthy, happy, and focused on their goals. Unfortunately for these young people, these supports ended when they became 18. Several youth argued that if more youth housing was available, youth who were older (e.g., 16 and up) could be provided with youth housing with supports, rather than being placed in foster care.





*“As a kid, when you tell a social worker, say you’re fifteen years old and you tell your social worker, ‘I’m not getting fed,’ and your social worker doesn’t believe you, because they think that the foster home that you’re in is providing you with necessities. You keep telling them that and they still don’t believe you, because you’re 15 years old – ‘you don’t know better, you’re a kid.’ So, I think social services needs to listen to the kids that are actually in need of help... If my social worker actually listened to the concerns I had about being abused and being neglected, then I wouldn’t have had the things that I grew up with.”*

**CALGARY YOUTH**

## Difficult Transitions from Care

Transitioning out of the child welfare system was extremely difficult for some youth. Many young people expressed that they did not have the skills, supports, savings, or networks to survive on their own after care, and they had few people to help them with the transition. Many had not been supported to create a plan for independent living, and were unaware of where they could go to get help once they were on their own. Several youth described the “shock” of being transitioned out of the system overnight, and the incredible effort and time it took to transition onto other income supports. In some cases, youth transitioned directly from care into homelessness.

### **One Montreal youth viewed his own homelessness as inevitable because he had been in the foster care system:**

“For me, there’s nothing that could’ve [prevented me from becoming homeless], because starting out I was already in the foster care system, and when I left the foster care system they gave me two garbage bags and told me to get the hell out.”

Importantly, youth across the country felt that their homelessness could have been prevented if they had greater access to funds and supports when they were transitioning out of care.

*“Upon aging out for myself, I was at risk of becoming homeless...because... as I was aging out, I was told I needed a plan, and I was told I needed to figure everything out, but when it came to that point...I wasn’t given any of the services... lists of services, or introduced to any services that would have helped me figure out these plans, and I had to find them myself. So, it wasn’t really easy.”*

KAMLOOPS YOUTH

# PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: Youth's Proposed Solutions

## Policy & System Change

- Reduce waitlists for youth housing
- Ensure that youth's wishes drive decisions as to whether, and how, a young person is removed from a home or not
- Do not allow a young person to transition out of care without a plan in place for stable housing and supports
- Improve the monitoring of foster homes to quickly identify and respond to abuse and neglect
- Improve coordination and communication within child welfare, and between child welfare and other systems
- Enable youth to choose their foster care placements and change their minds about their placement, creating rapid pathways for youth to obtain alternative, appropriate, and safe housing in such cases
- Improve screening processes to ensure foster homes are safe and appropriate
- Assist youth in care to save funds for independent living by establishing savings accounts for youth into which their government funds are deposited (accessible when youth transition out of care)

## Investments

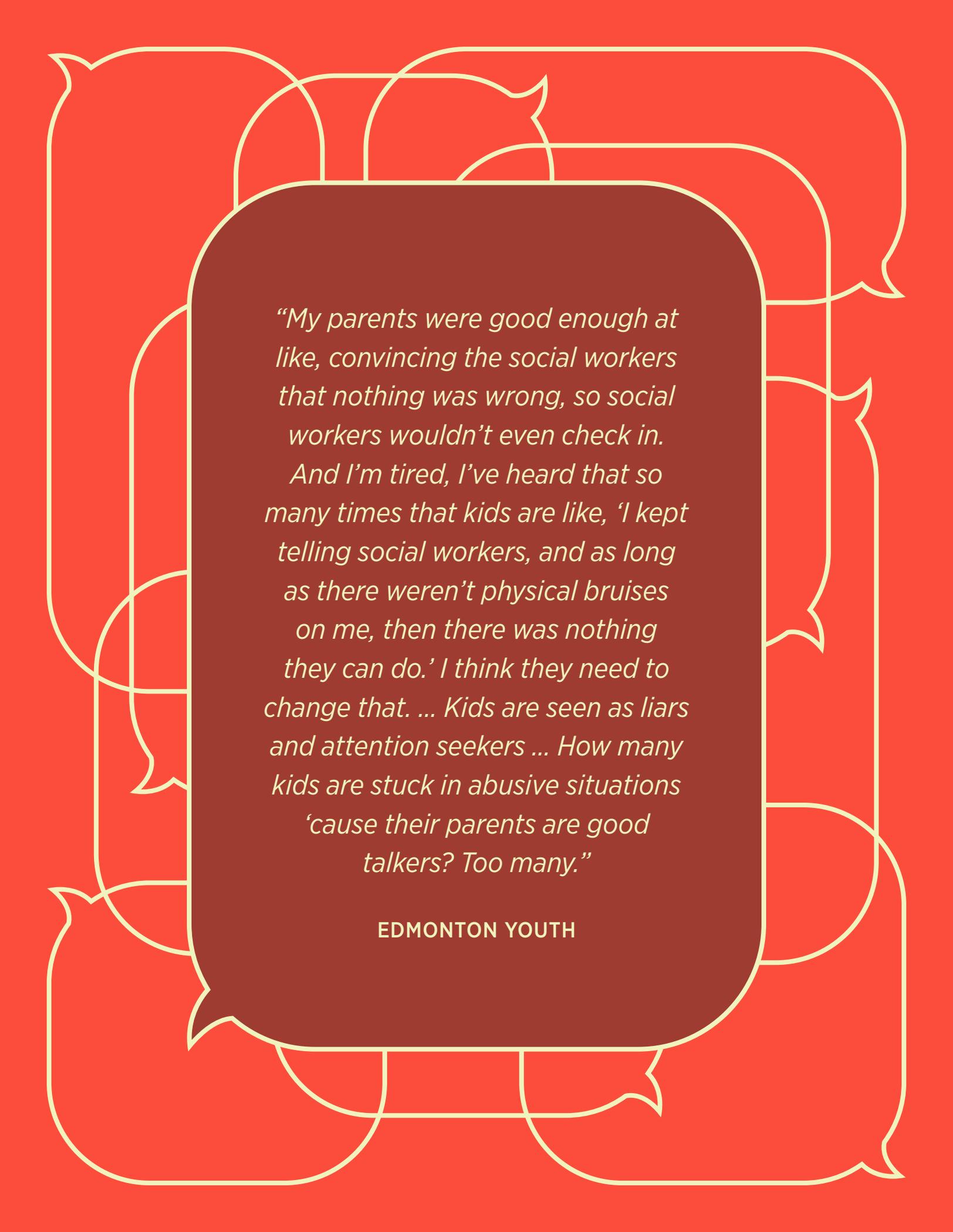
- Invest in and expand youth housing options as an alternative to foster care placement, including housing and supports specifically for Indigenous youth, LGBTQ2S+ youth, and POC youth
- Offer income supports and services to youth with child welfare involvement up to the age of 25
- Increase financial supports and wrap around care for youth transitioning out of the child welfare system

## Professional Conduct & Training

- Implement improved accountability mechanisms to ensure case workers are appropriately and adequately responding to children and youth's needs, and listening and valuing the opinions of young people
- Improve training and education for social workers on how to identify and respond to abuse
- Provide ongoing training for case workers to better meet the needs of youth
- Implement accountability mechanisms to ensure child welfare workers never breach youth's rights to confidentiality

## Interventions

- Provide counselling and supports to caregivers and foster families struggling with parenting
- Provide each youth in care with an advocate/system navigator to provide support during and after care
- Provide life skills programs to youth in care and transitioning out of care
- Educate youth on their rights as wards of the state, and the responsibilities of their foster families and social workers to provide for them
- Provide free family mediation services, including for foster families
- Adopt a harm reduction approach within any child protection intervention
- Educate youth in care on available services and supports they can access both during and after care



*“My parents were good enough at like, convincing the social workers that nothing was wrong, so social workers wouldn’t even check in. And I’m tired, I’ve heard that so many times that kids are like, ‘I kept telling social workers, and as long as there weren’t physical bruises on me, then there was nothing they can do.’ I think they need to change that. ... Kids are seen as liars and attention seekers ... How many kids are stuck in abusive situations ‘cause their parents are good talkers? Too many.”*

**EDMONTON YOUTH**

## MOVING FORWARD

**National data has shown that youth who are homeless are 193 times more likely to have been involved with child welfare than the general public (Nichols et al., 2017).**

Youth that face systemic and structural disadvantages (e.g., poverty, racism, homophobia) are more likely to experience both child welfare involvement and homelessness (Gypen et al., 2017), indicating that many ministries and systems have a role to play in improving young people's experiences before, during, and after care. Indigenous youth are particularly overrepresented in the child welfare system in Canada (Blackstock et al., 2004; Statistics Canada, 2011), indicating a particular need to address the intersections between colonialism and child welfare. Despite regional and provincial/territorial differences in policy and service provision, we know that youth in – and leaving – state care in Canada disproportionately experience negative outcomes in many life domains, including health, housing, education, and employment (Barker et al., 2014). This study further demonstrates the need to break the link between child welfare and youth homelessness.

**A crucial finding of this study is the frequency with which young people felt that child welfare workers failed to protect them from abuse and neglect, or contributed to their experiences of isolation and marginalization.**

In order to effectively prevent youth homelessness, we need to better understand the forces that are shaping child welfare workers' responses to abuse. These dynamics may be driven by inadequate funding, unmanageable caseloads, poor training and supervision, or policies over which they have little control. While this study suggests that some frontline child welfare workers would benefit from training in anti-oppression and solutions- and equity-oriented practice, it is also essential that workers can offer youth resources that would actually make a difference: free family counselling and mediation, safe youth housing, livable social assistance rates for families, an After Care Guarantee, or foster homes within a young person's community and culture. If we want to use the child welfare system as a tool for youth homelessness prevention, we need to ensure we are simultaneously making changes in other public systems as well.

## 2.3 HEALTHCARE & ADDICTIONS

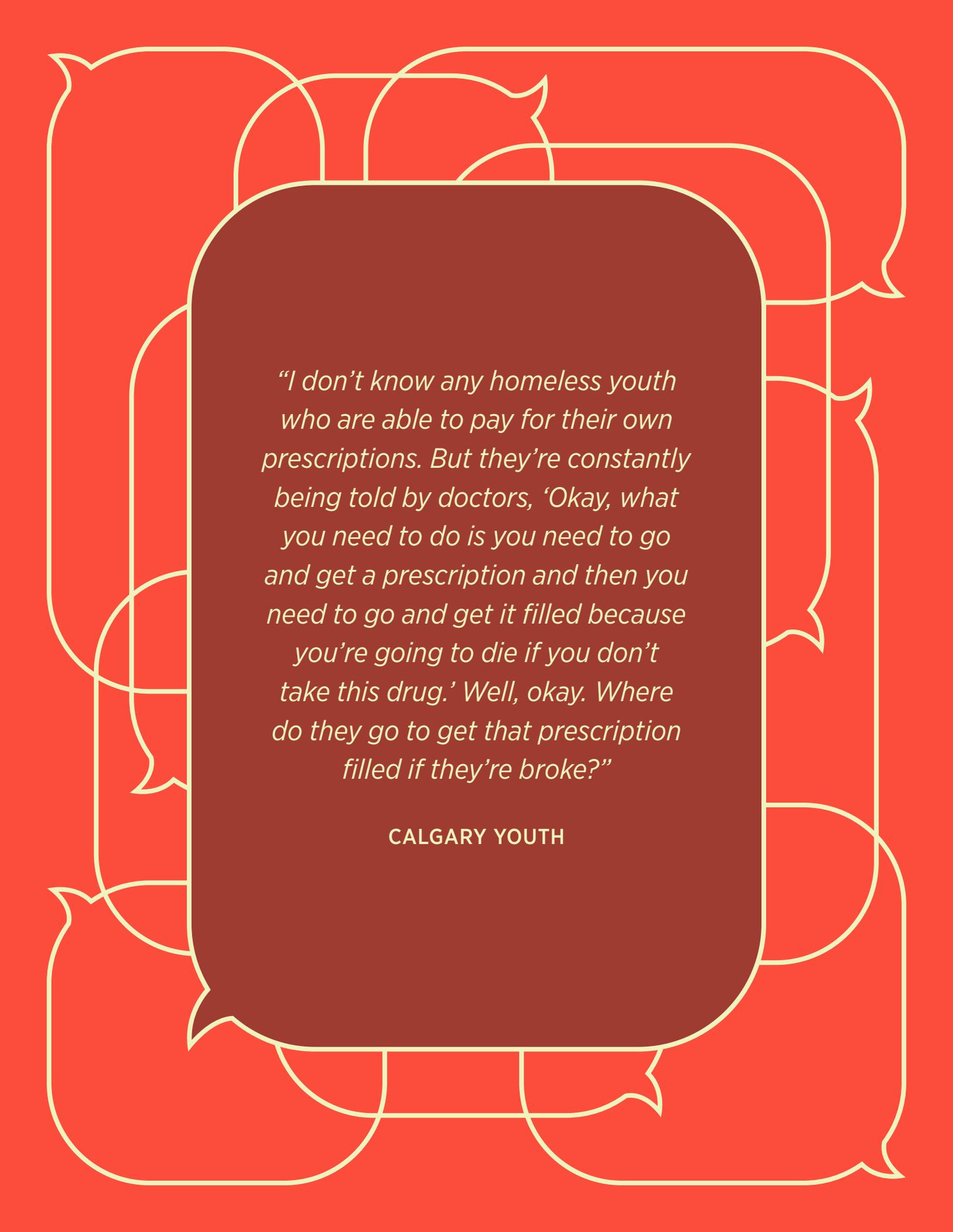
For young people across the country, challenges related to health, mental health, and addictions are both a precursor to, and consequence of, homelessness. Many youth discussed how difficult it was to live with family members experiencing mental health and addictions issues. Others described living in constant fear of eviction because social assistance didn't adequately cover their caregivers' healthcare needs. In the context of these challenges, it is not surprising that many youth described their own mental health or addiction issues as linked to childhood experiences of adversity, trauma, and violence, including intergenerational trauma within Indigenous families. Sadly, youth's families often did not have the supports or funds necessary to help them deal with these difficulties. When discussing the responsiveness of the healthcare system to these issues, youth raised four major issues: availability, accessibility, affordability, and stigma.

*“My trauma led me down a wrong path, and I didn't know that I had ... places where I could go to access help for that. And my family didn't know how to support me with my mental health. So they ended up giving up on me because they didn't know... how. And they didn't have... anyone show them or teach them how to take care of someone with those circumstances.”*

KAMLOOPS YOUTH

**Once on the streets, the impact of these system failures became particularly acute for young people, contributing to difficulties obtaining housing or remaining in school.**

The availability of health, mental health, and addictions supports was an issue raised by many young people, particularly youth from smaller communities. In some cases these supports weren't available in their community, or they didn't know about them. Youth particularly struggled to access mental health supports once homeless, with one young person in St. John's explaining that they had been on the waitlist to see a psychiatrist for three years. Other youth couldn't access supports because of age restrictions or because caregivers refused to grant them permission. The cost of mental health services was prohibitive for many, as were the cost of prescriptions (for example, one Yellowknife youth explained that obtaining Plan Bs was very difficult). The appropriateness of available healthcare was also an issue, with several youth commenting that supports or services were rarely targeted to young people, including young women, and thus did not feel safe or welcoming.



*“I don’t know any homeless youth who are able to pay for their own prescriptions. But they’re constantly being told by doctors, ‘Okay, what you need to do is you need to go and get a prescription and then you need to go and get it filled because you’re going to die if you don’t take this drug.’ Well, okay. Where do they go to get that prescription filled if they’re broke?”*

**CALGARY YOUTH**

An additional issue raised by many youth was the stigma they experienced both within and outside of the healthcare system.

Several youth reported feeling disrespected or misunderstood by healthcare professionals, recounting experiences in which they felt judged. These youth also felt that these staff often failed to involve them in decision-making about their care and recovery.



*“The healthcare professionals ... they notice that you’re self-harming and they start to, ‘Oh, you self-harm. You’re this, and this, and this. Let’s refer you to this, and then we’ll call you a bunch of names. And we’ll judge you, and not give you actual support, and we’ll treat you like an animal, and not treat you like a decent human being.’ If you’re at the [healthcare provider], or whatever, and you’re in the state of mental crisis, you need support and you don’t want to be judged. You want support and you want to feel safe, and you’re feeling very suicidal, and you can’t call anyone because if I call someone, they’re going to judge me, and say this and this about me, and they’ll talk about me when I’m not around.”*

ST. JOHN’S YOUTH

# PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN HEALTHCARE & ADDICTIONS SYSTEMS: Youth's Proposed Solutions

## Policy & System Change

- Run public awareness campaigns that de-stigmatize mental health issues
- Improve coordination and communication between healthcare services and other systems
- Run public awareness campaigns for youth about available mental health and addiction services
- Co-locate mental health and addiction services with other supports for youth at risk of homelessness
- Enable youth under 16 to access services for mental health and addictions without parental signatures
- Reduce the age at which youth can act as an advocate for themselves in the healthcare system
- Reduce waitlists for mental health supports, including in-patient care

## Investments

- Establish highly accessible emergency funds for families experiencing a health crisis
- Fund and expand affordable, accessible mental health and addiction supports in all communities, including Indigenous and rural communities
- Build and expand rehab centres for youth, including centres for female-identified youth specifically
- Increase social assistance rates for people with disabilities and chronic health issues
- Increase funding for community-based mental health supports for youth and their families

## Professional Conduct & Training

- Train medical staff to identify and report abuse when they see it
- Provide all healthcare professionals training on culturally-sensitive healthcare provision, empathy, and trauma-informed care

## Interventions

- Provide concrete, hands-on supports to assist youth to access mental health, health, and addiction services (e.g., accompany youth to appointments)
- Provide free access to dental care for youth and their families
- Offer free programs and supports to families whose child is experiencing mental health or addiction issues
- Ensure all mental health interventions are adjusted to each youth's unique needs

## MOVING FORWARD

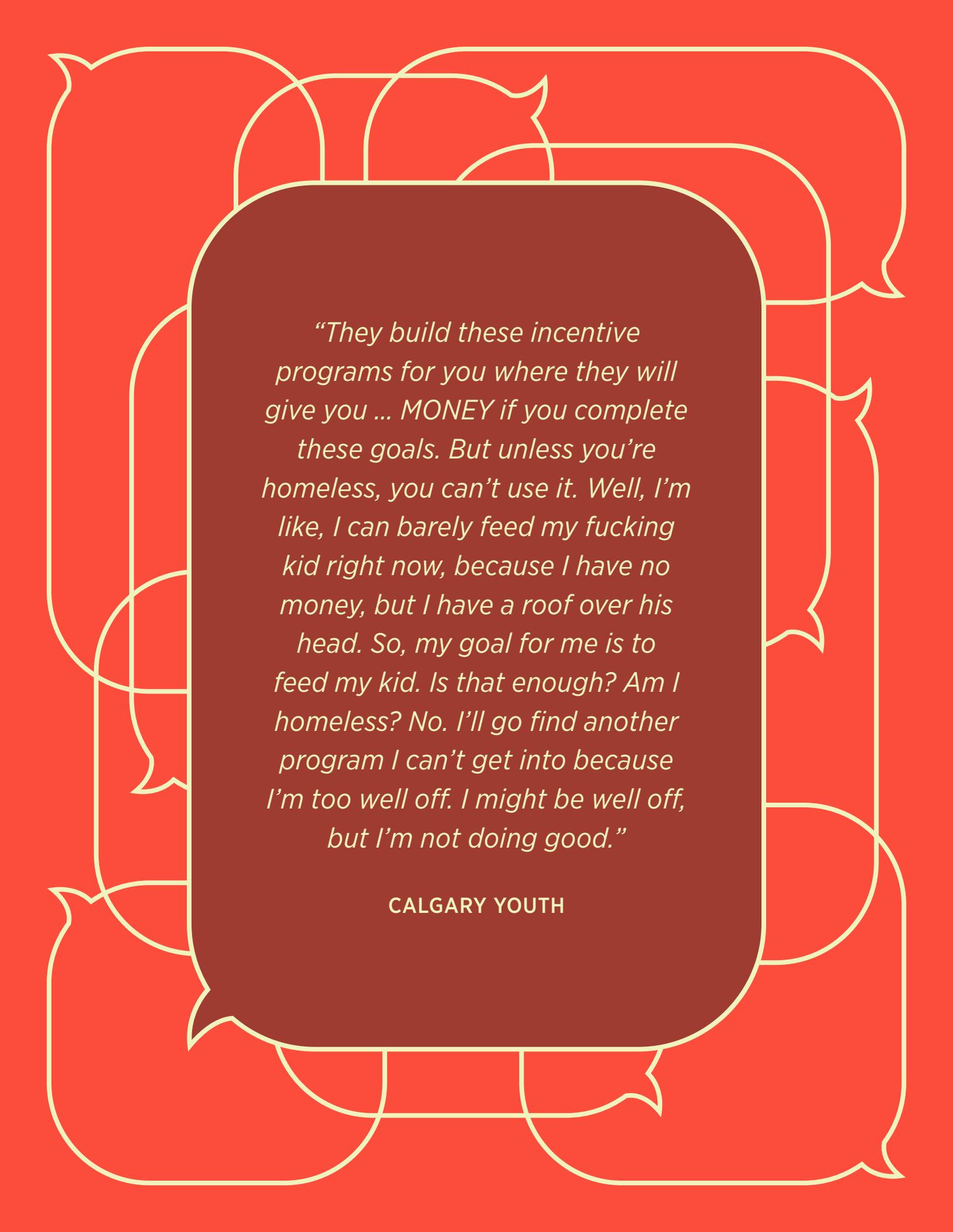
Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey (2016) revealed that among youth who are homeless in Canada, 85.4% experienced a mental health crisis, 42% had attempted suicide at least once, and 35.2% had experienced at least one overdose requiring hospitalization. Research has shown that these challenges often begin long before a young person is on the street, usually in the context of conflict, violence, and poverty within the family (Craig & Hodson, 1998; Karabanow et al., 2007). The longer youth and their families are left without appropriate and timely interventions, the worse the short- and long-term outcomes are (Schwan et al., 2017).

Many youth become trapped in cycles of destitution and suffering, which comes at an enormous social and economic cost to Canada.

The challenges youth shared in this study reveal the severe need for accessible, affordable, and supportive family and youth-centred mental health and addiction supports. By providing adequate supports to youth and their families when issues emerge, rather than after crises occur, we can contribute to housing stability for young people, as well as improve their well-being and health.

*“It’s more of changing what people think is ‘the time’ to help ... Maybe you should help them when they are on the verge of becoming homeless, or they’re well on the way, and they’re seeking the help beforehand. Instead of, like, when their bank account is zero and they’re on the street, and THEN you help them. Why didn’t you do it when they had a few dollars and a couple of days left? Why couldn’t you do it then?”*

EDMONTON YOUTH



*“They build these incentive programs for you where they will give you ... MONEY if you complete these goals. But unless you’re homeless, you can’t use it. Well, I’m like, I can barely feed my fucking kid right now, because I have no money, but I have a roof over his head. So, my goal for me is to feed my kid. Is that enough? Am I homeless? No. I’ll go find another program I can’t get into because I’m too well off. I might be well off, but I’m not doing good.”*

**CALGARY YOUTH**

## 2.4 YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SECTOR

In focus groups across the country, young people were clear on three things:

(1) there were very few interventions available to help them before they became homeless,

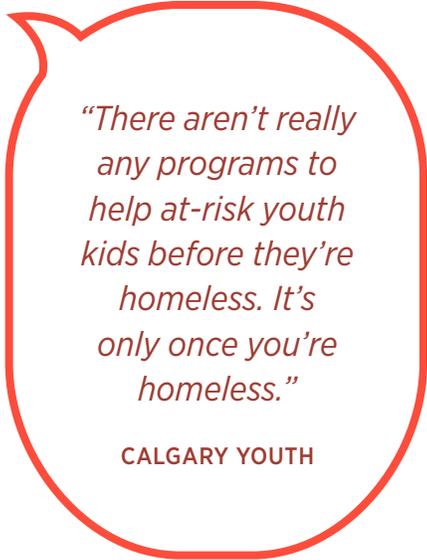
(2) they had difficulty accessing homelessness services and supports once they did become homeless, and

(3) they had difficulty transitioning out of homelessness quickly, in part due to policies, practices, and staff behaviours within the youth homelessness sector.

These three themes suggest that in many communities across Canada, youth homelessness sectors are not structured to prevent homelessness. While youth explained that emergency homelessness services are life-saving and in dire need of funding, they also articulated a need for services to focus on quickly transitioning youth out of homelessness, as well as provide supports *well before* a young person becomes homeless.

### Minimal Early Intervention Efforts

Many youth explained that few services or supports were accessible to them when they were at risk of homelessness and needed help. Youth reported numerous instances in which they sought help from the youth homelessness sector but were told by staff that there was nothing that could be done until they were “actually homeless,” or met specific criteria. For some youth this was a deeply frustrating experience, with several disengaging from seeking help.



*“There aren’t really any programs to help at-risk youth kids before they’re homeless. It’s only once you’re homeless.”*

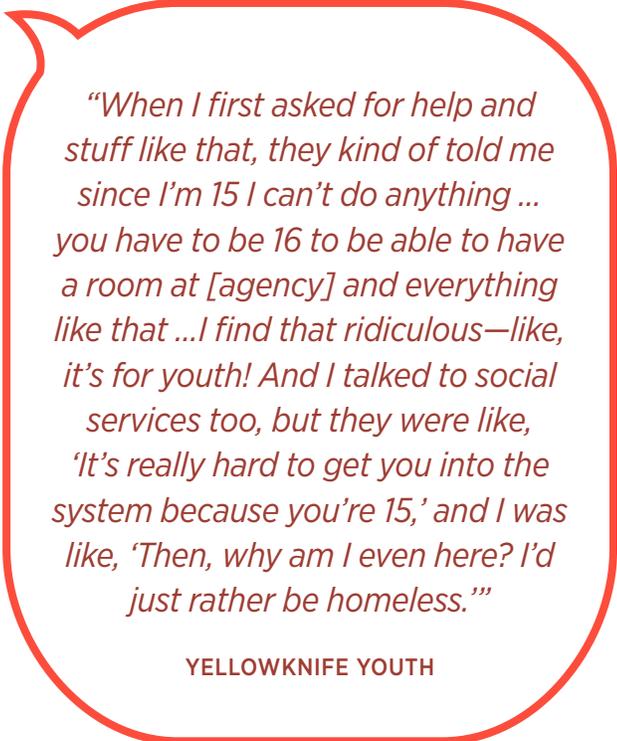
CALGARY YOUTH

Youth explained that access to some homelessness programs or benefits are often predicated on a very narrow definition of homelessness (e.g., sleeping rough).

This meant that many young people were blocked from accessing supports if they were living in a house of some kind, even if that housing was precarious, unsafe, inadequate, or unaffordable. Youth consistently discussed instances where they were not considered “in need enough” to qualify for help from homelessness services or programs until they ended up on the street.

### **Accessibility & Availability Issues**

The vast majority of youth across Canada explained that prior to becoming homeless, they were unaware what homelessness services existed or how to access them. This made it difficult to get the help they needed prior to becoming homeless, and resulted in panicked efforts to find help once they were on the streets. Many youth reported being homeless for weeks or months before learning of services, and several explained that they ate out of garbage cans because didn't know about services that offered meals. This was particularly the case for young people from rural or remote communities, who were forced to leave due to violence, discrimination, or lack of services, and had to navigate a new city alone with no funds.

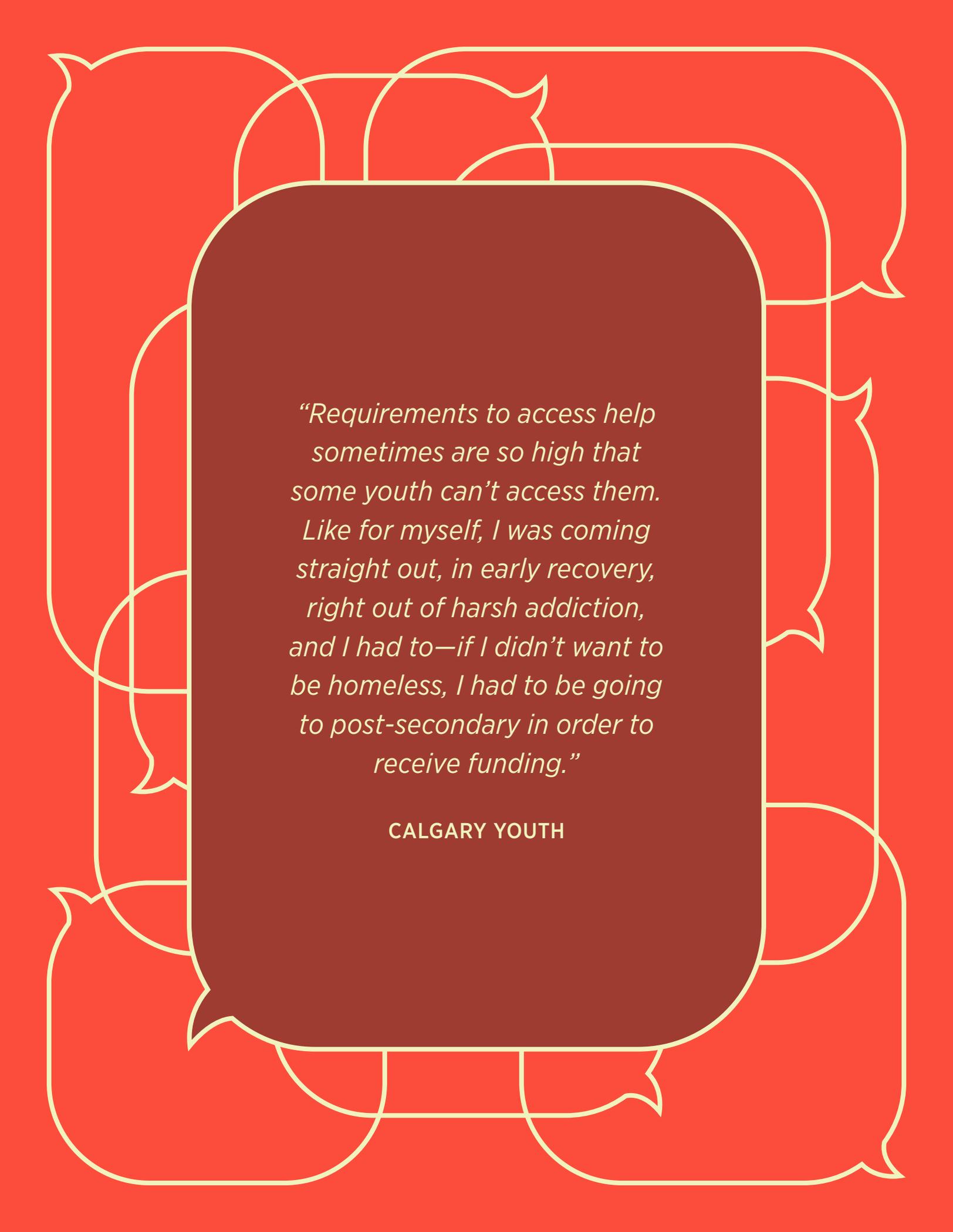


*“When I first asked for help and stuff like that, they kind of told me since I’m 15 I can’t do anything ... you have to be 16 to be able to have a room at [agency] and everything like that ...I find that ridiculous—like, it’s for youth! And I talked to social services too, but they were like, ‘It’s really hard to get you into the system because you’re 15,’ and I was like, ‘Then, why am I even here? I’d just rather be homeless.’”*

YELLOWKNIFE YOUTH

### **In terms of service availability, youth from suburban, rural, and wealthy areas reported a dearth of local services.**

Youth also discussed long waitlists to receive help in the youth homelessness sector, and described the fear-inducing experience of being told that a shelter is full. Young people described the challenges, violence, and physical danger they faced when services were unavailable or closed early.



*“Requirements to access help sometimes are so high that some youth can’t access them. Like for myself, I was coming straight out, in early recovery, right out of harsh addiction, and I had to—if I didn’t want to be homeless, I had to be going to post-secondary in order to receive funding.”*

**CALGARY YOUTH**

Age was consistently raised as a reason that young people couldn't access services in the youth homelessness sector, with younger youth requiring a parent's signature in order to gain access. Several youth explained that it would be extremely beneficial for youth under 16 to have access to services that didn't require parental signatures, and didn't alert caregivers that they were using services, especially if they were coming from abusive homes.

### **System barriers to quick transitions out of homelessness**

Youth also described policies, practices, and staff behaviours within the youth homelessness sector that created barriers to transitioning out of homelessness quickly. Youth identified that services often predicate access to supports or housing on being able to satisfy particular requirements or expectations. Many youth experienced difficulty remaining in services or housing that required significant engagement in employment, education, or programming in order to access supports. This was especially difficult for youth with mental health challenges. The consequences of these policies were severe for some youth, creating barriers to escaping homelessness and having a detrimental effect on youth's self-esteem, mental health, and well-being.

Youth also felt that discrimination within the youth homelessness sector, including from staff, significantly impacted their ability to gain assistance and escape homelessness. Youth reported that some services do not welcome LGBTQ2S+ youth, or that they experienced peer violence or discrimination in the shelter system. Several youth discussed that they felt discriminated against due to their mental health issues, with one youth reporting being kicked out of multiple services due to her mental health challenges. Further, several youth felt that staff ignored their issues, refused to help, or put up barriers to accessing supports. Not only did these challenges make it hard for youth to transition out of homelessness quickly and permanently, in some cases they further contributed to marginalization and isolation.

**Some younger youth explained that they avoided services altogether because they feared being returned to abusive homes due to these policies.**

*"Having housing both for queer and for POC people specifically, or at least oriented towards that ... would be really nice because it feels safer ... That's why I'm scared to death of turning 19, if I end up homeless, 'cause I don't know. Safe houses are one thing - I can get a separate room and stuff - but if I have to go to a regular shelter, I don't know how safe I'd feel, and I don't know if I'd just kind of just rather nap throughout the day and be awake all night instead."*

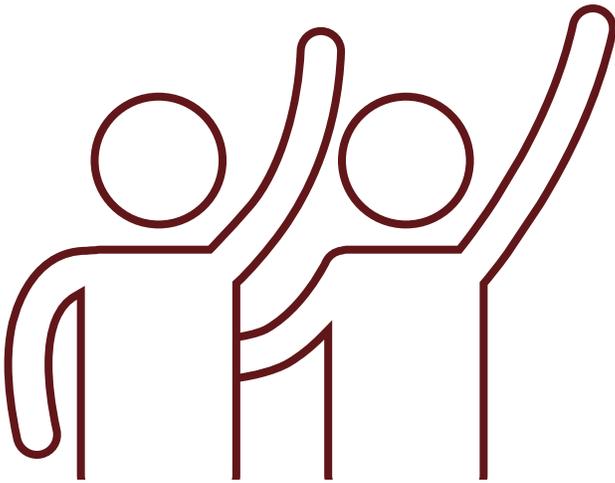
VANCOUVER YOUTH



*“Yeah, when I first moved in [to Yellowknife] I was homeless for a weekend in January—coldest weekend, I almost lost two of my toes because I had to walk all the way up to McDonald’s on Sunday - nothing was open. I had, like, a tiny little jacket, I had runners ... Minus 34 that day.”*

**YELLOWKNIFE YOUTH**

Youth also felt that some agencies lacked a sense of urgency in their response to youth homelessness, and that staff were sometimes slow to respond.



Fortunately, many youth also described the profoundly impactful support they received from social service providers, in some cases crediting those providers with their lives. Youth especially appreciated when agencies emphasized: low-barriers, acceptance, a sense of belonging and community, safety from stigmatization and violence, space to heal and grow, flexibility, respect, no time limits or timelines for accessing service, personal expression, and ensuring youth have control over their own lives.

*“When I was on the streets there was a very *laisse faire* attitude when you’re a new youth that was homeless. And it’s very easy to just be put into the system and forgotten, and I think it should be encouraged that the ground-level staff create a community vibe of, ‘You’re here, but you need to get out of here.’ ... Like when I first became homeless, I thought someone was going to pull me aside and be like, ‘What are you doing here?’ No one did. It can be forgotten the second we accept the homeless lifestyle and the culture as the norm. You always have to have that frantic, sort of like, ‘Let’s get you the hell out of here when you first come.’”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

# PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN THE YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SECTOR: Youth's Proposed Solutions

## Policy & System Change

- Develop regional and community-based plans on the prevention of youth homelessness
- Increase the length of time that youth can remain in emergency and transitional housing, ensuring that youth are not kicked out without access to stable housing
- Increase and improve coordination and communication between services and supports for youth experiencing homelessness
- Centralize supports and services in the same location, employing a 'hub' model
- Reduce age requirements for accessing services and allow youth under 16 to access services without parental permission
- Enable older youth to access youth services (aged 25-29)
- Reduce acuity criteria for accessing homelessness services
- Do not require youth to engage in programming, employment, or education in order to access services
- Low or no-barrier access to services
- Advertise and promote available services in all neighbourhoods, including through pamphlets and posters in schools, community centres, alleys, malls, and in any spaces where youth at risk are likely to spend time
- Ensure the availability of 24/7/365 supports and services for youth in all communities
- Prohibit services from banning youth based on their identity or challenges they face (e.g., mental health challenges)
- Offer free or reduced transit fares for youth in need
- Hire more frontline staff with lived experiences of homelessness
- Hire more Indigenous staff

## Investments

- Provide increased and consistent funding to agencies to provide crisis interventions, early intervention, and housing stabilization
- Create and fund safe, youth-friendly housing options that youth can access in their home communities when they first become homeless

## Professional Conduct & Training

- Establish “no bias” policies and training on intersectionality in all social services supporting youth
- Ensure all staff are trained in anti-discrimination, anti-oppression, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, empathy, trauma-informed care, and cultural competency
- Ensure all staff training and practice is trauma-informed, culturally competent, and tailored to each youth’s unique needs

## Interventions

- Establish a 24hr helpline with information about services, referrals, and availability, ensuring that helpline staff are trained in empathy and anti-oppression
- Educate community members about services and how to refer youth
- Increase outreach to youth that are at risk or experiencing hidden homelessness
- Ensure the availability of services targeted to particular groups of youth (e.g., Indigenous youth)
- Establish a youth-friendly online database of services in each community
- Provide more supports and services to help young people leave sex work, if they want to
- Ensure harm reduction programming makes the connections between trauma and substance use, and supports young people in their recovery from trauma

# IMPROVING EMERGENCY SERVICE PROVISION – YOUTH’S THOUGHTS

For decades, the youth homelessness sector has been tasked with solving a problem it didn’t create, with minimal funds and an ever-increasing demand. The crucial supports provided by the youth homelessness sector continue to be life-saving for youth across the country, and agencies have tirelessly stretched dollars, staff, and resources to do so. In focus groups across Canada, youth identified key improvements to these services they wanted to see.

While the recommendations below cannot be considered prevention unless they are provided in the context of immediate access to housing, they are important to many youth and need to be highlighted here. Proposed improvements include:

- Provide increased and consistent funding to all agencies and organizations offering emergency supports to youth, including particularly in communities in which there are few services
- Expand the availability of emergency shelters and services for youth experiencing homelessness, including the availability of emergency shelters for youth fleeing abuse
- Provide life skills training within all youth shelters
- Provide youth with storage lockers in shelters
- Increase the availability of animal-friendly youth shelters

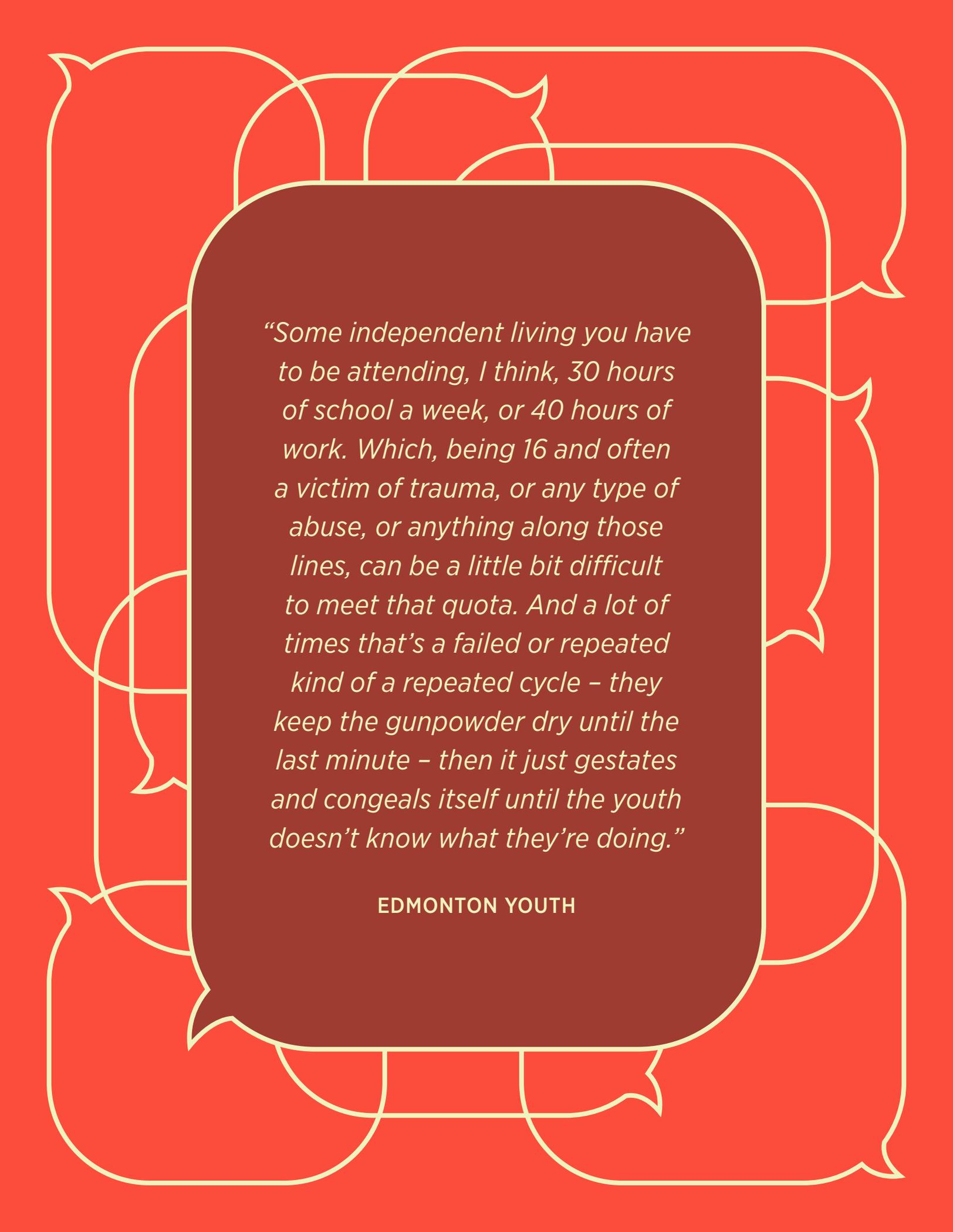
## MOVING FORWARD

Youth's comments on the youth homelessness sector demonstrate two key things: (1) the youth homelessness sector has not been designed to prevent youth homelessness, and (2) the youth homelessness sector needs increased investment and coordination to better prevent young people from becoming homeless, and to help youth transition out of homelessness quickly. Fortunately, in many communities the youth homelessness sector is reorienting itself to prevention. This means investing in system coordination, early intervention programs, and housing stabilization efforts to rapidly re-house youth. For some organizations this requires a re-thinking of approach at every level, including the frontline. As these shifts occur, improved *access* and *availability* of services must be a cornerstone of this work. As we shift towards prevention, these young people remind us of the urgent action needed across systems to make youth homelessness prevention possible.



*“A lot of agencies work independently from one another, and they can do external referrals, but a lot of them don’t in larger communities. And there should be provincially set standards, where agencies and social services work together to be able to fill in those gaps that they’re missing.”*

KAMLOOPS YOUTH



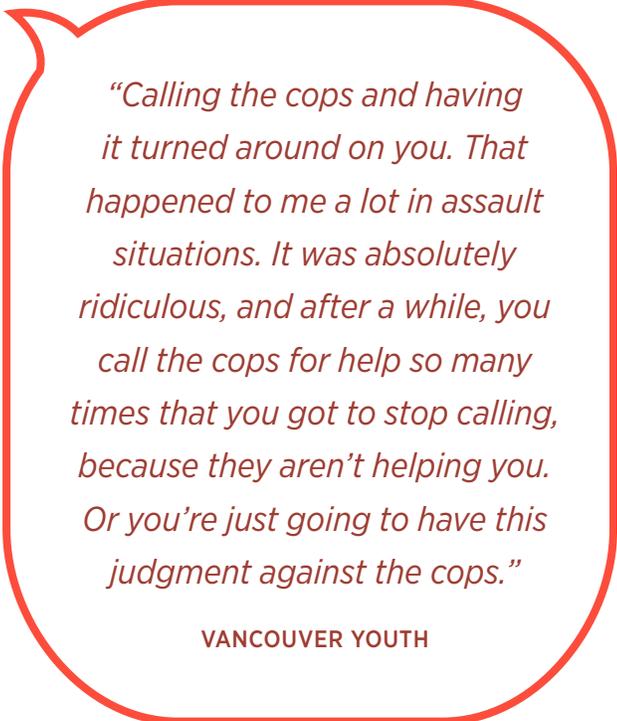
*“Some independent living you have to be attending, I think, 30 hours of school a week, or 40 hours of work. Which, being 16 and often a victim of trauma, or any type of abuse, or anything along those lines, can be a little bit difficult to meet that quota. And a lot of times that’s a failed or repeated kind of a repeated cycle – they keep the gunpowder dry until the last minute – then it just gestates and congeals itself until the youth doesn’t know what they’re doing.”*

**EDMONTON YOUTH**

## 2.5 CRIMINAL JUSTICE

A common concern among youth was mistreatment from police officers, including police profiling and officers failing to adequately respond to family violence or violence in the community. In some instances, youth reported that this happened so frequently that they stopped calling 911. Other young people reported that they were ignored or not believed by responding officers. One youth described being shamed by a police officer because he wasn't being a "man" in response to his caregiver threatening him with assault and a gun. Youth reported that these experiences resulted in a breakdown of trust in the criminal justice system.

Youth discussed being profiled by police because they appeared poor and young, and being told to leave public spaces for this reason. Youth also felt that Indigenous Peoples faced poor treatment from police officers, with one youth expressing that the criminalization Indigenous youth blocks them from employment and traps them in poverty. These comments resonate with what we know about POC people being disproportionately targeted for 'street checks' and 'carding' practices as well (Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011). Due to repeated negative interactions with police, several youth were skeptical that police practices would change. One Montreal youth commented, "The police will never change, that's for sure."

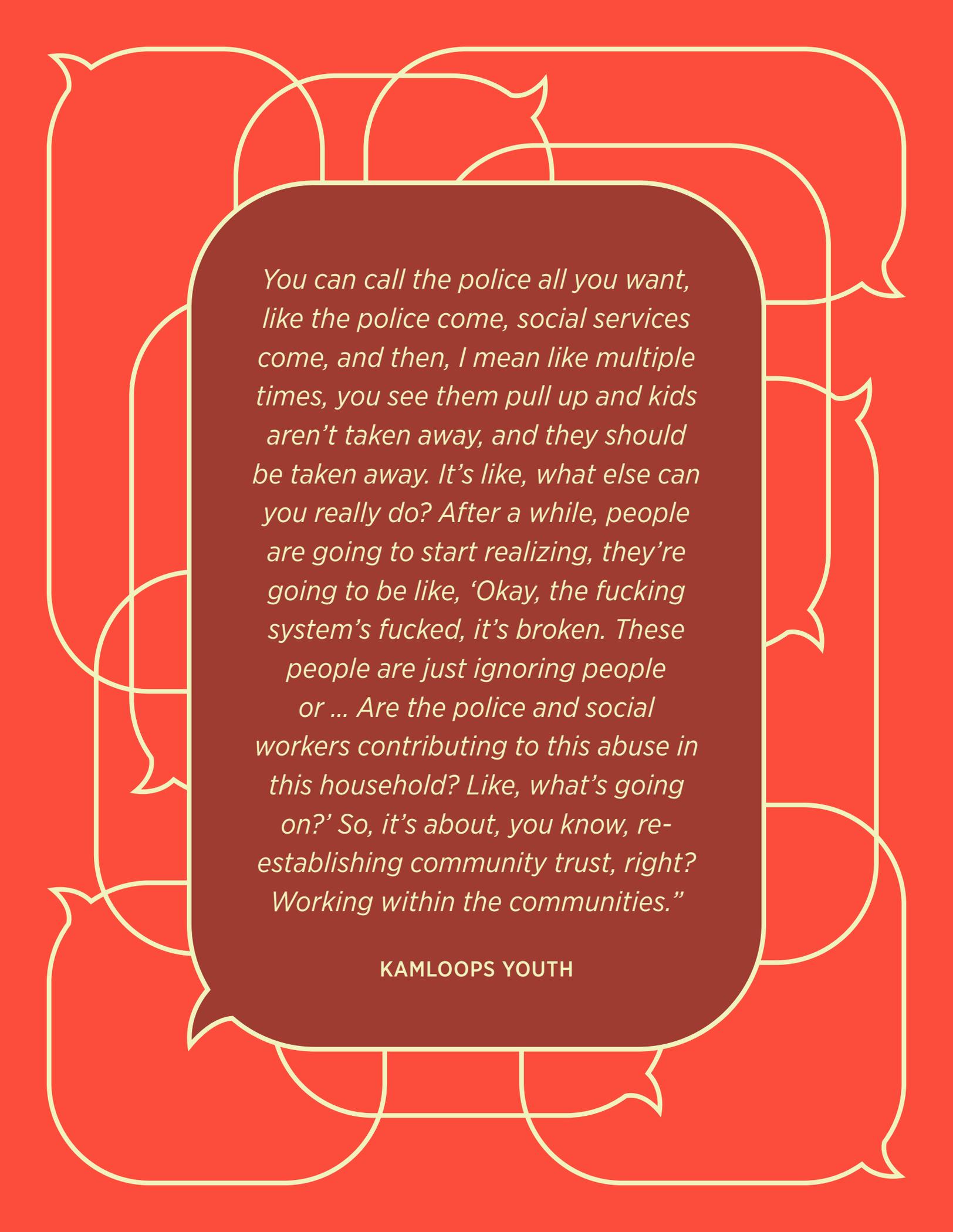


*"Calling the cops and having it turned around on you. That happened to me a lot in assault situations. It was absolutely ridiculous, and after a while, you call the cops for help so many times that you got to stop calling, because they aren't helping you. Or you're just going to have this judgment against the cops."*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

Youth explained that youth transitioning out of corrections face difficulties transitioning back into society, suggesting that more supports and housing need to be offered to ensure youth do not cycle back into the criminal justice system.

**Youth also requested that there be alternatives to incarcerating youth, including through diversion programs.**



*You can call the police all you want, like the police come, social services come, and then, I mean like multiple times, you see them pull up and kids aren't taken away, and they should be taken away. It's like, what else can you really do? After a while, people are going to start realizing, they're going to be like, 'Okay, the fucking system's fucked, it's broken. These people are just ignoring people or ... Are the police and social workers contributing to this abuse in this household? Like, what's going on?' So, it's about, you know, re-establishing community trust, right? Working within the communities."*

**KAMLOOPS YOUTH**

# PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: Youth's Proposed Solutions

## Policy & System Change

- End police profiling and criminalization of young people who are poor and homeless
- Establish accountability mechanisms to monitor and address harm caused to poor and homeless youth by police officers
- Identify and systematically eliminate police profiling and criminalization of Indigenous Peoples and POC
- Provide adequate and appropriate housing to youth who are transitioning out of corrections
- End police policies that remove youth from public spaces, including specifically youth that appear poor or homeless
- Provide alternatives to prison for youth with involvement in the criminal justice system
- When sentencing youth who have experiences of homelessness or poverty, consider how the crime may be the direct consequence of youth trying to survive and feed themselves or their families

## Professional Conduct & Training

- Ensure police adequately and appropriately respond to all reports of abuse and neglect, and do not leave children and youth exposed to violence

## Interventions

- Provide increased programs and supports for youth transitioning from corrections, including information about available services, supports, and housing
- Provide concrete, hands-on support to help youth transitioning from corrections to access healthcare, mental health care, and addictions supports and services
- For youth who have spent many years incarcerated, provide education to support their transition back into a society that may have changed significantly
- Provide youth transitioning out of corrections with a mentor in the community who had previous criminal justice involvement and has successfully maintained housing, employment, and not cycled back into the criminal justice system
- For youth transitioning out of corrections, provide access to good quality jobs with horizons for growth
- Offer programs that educate youth on their legal and human rights within various systems, including the education system and the youth homelessness sector

*“They [the government] should tell the police to stop picking up the kid who looks a little trashy, to leave the kid alone. The kid on a park bench who’s resting a little, tell the police officers to stop bothering them. Because he’s not doing anything ... He’s resting ... Vancouver is the worst spot for that. I was working, I had my bag, I was going home to my house. I had a house, a life, and the cops came up to me - I was a little trashy, and I was waiting for the bus. And they told me to get off the street. But the street is ‘GrandeVille,’ it’s a big street, and I had to walk, and they followed me the whole way. I told them that I had just come from work and that I was waiting for the bus to go back home, it didn’t change a thing. Because I was young, and I looked a little trashy.”*

**MONTREAL YOUTH**

## MOVING FORWARD

Canadian research shows that youth who are homeless are almost six times more likely to be victims of violent crime than the general population (Gaetz et al., 2016).

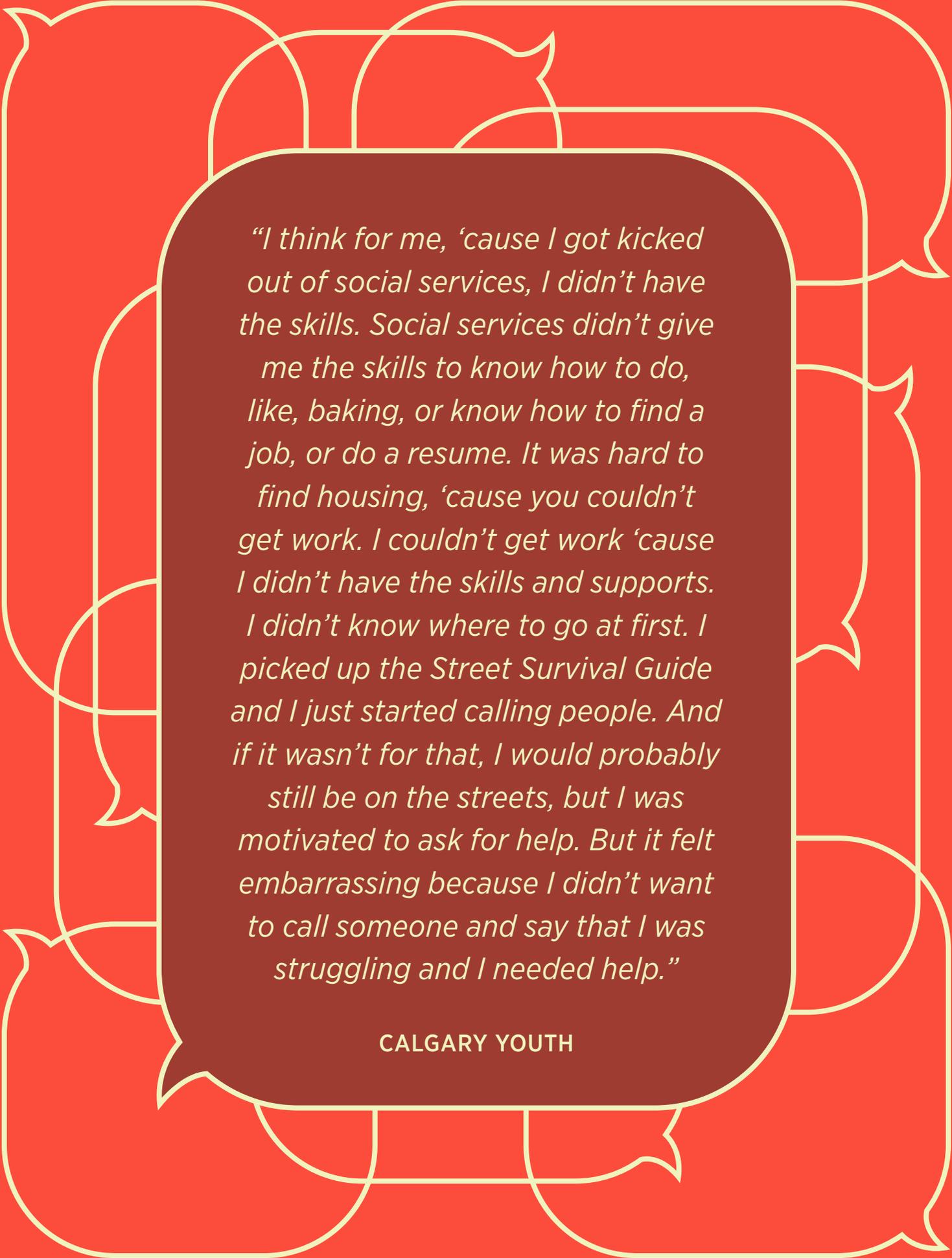
However, few youth reported turning to the police when they were victimized. Why? According to many youth in this study, it is an issue of trust. Through their experiences of being ignored, shamed, or silenced when they sought help for family violence, youth learned that the police would not protect them. For some, this was further emphasized when they experienced police profiling or criminalization because of their race and class. These experiences may contribute to a general distrust of all state or government systems, causing some youth to further distance themselves from services that might actually help them escape homelessness. More broadly, these experiences suggest that class, race, and age significantly affect one's access to justice in Canada.



*The amount of times that I've had to call a cop ... once they deescalate the situation, they just leave. They don't ask how I am doing ... Social services didn't come to my school the next day. I was like, are you kidding me?"*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

Given the importance of crime reduction in many communities, and the significant funding often allocated to it, these young people raise three areas of crime that desperately need to be reduced: child abuse; violence against youth who are poor and homeless; and the criminalization of, and violence against, Indigenous Peoples and POC. It is clear that greater access to justice is needed for young people who are poor, who are experiencing abuse, and who are Indigenous. This includes young women and gender-minority youth who commonly experience sexual violence on the streets (Gaetz et al., 2016). The trauma and challenges that often result from violent victimization without redress contribute to trapping young people in homelessness and poverty (Gaetz, 2004). This means that homelessness prevention must involve systematically rethinking how the criminal justice system can better serve young people.



*“I think for me, ‘cause I got kicked out of social services, I didn’t have the skills. Social services didn’t give me the skills to know how to do, like, baking, or know how to find a job, or do a resume. It was hard to find housing, ‘cause you couldn’t get work. I couldn’t get work ‘cause I didn’t have the skills and supports. I didn’t know where to go at first. I picked up the Street Survival Guide and I just started calling people. And if it wasn’t for that, I would probably still be on the streets, but I was motivated to ask for help. But it felt embarrassing because I didn’t want to call someone and say that I was struggling and I needed help.”*

**CALGARY YOUTH**

### 3. PREVENTING INDIVIDUAL & RELATIONAL CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS

Youth homelessness prevention for individuals and families involves tackling the personal circumstances that place young people at risk of homelessness, such as medical crises, family conflict, or mental health issues. Because young people’s pathways into homelessness often begins at home, these efforts must necessarily tackle the personal issues that caregivers and family members are struggling with as well. Youth identified four areas in which policy change, increased supports, and improved access to services would be beneficial: (1) family conflict, abuse, and neglect, (2) health, mental health, and addictions crises (3) social exclusion and isolation, and (4) violence in the community.



# 3.1 FAMILY CONFLICT, ABUSE, & NEGLECT

Youth across Canada recounted countless experiences of conflict, abuse, and neglect, often stretching over years and across multiple homes. Young people reported caregivers and caregivers' partners or friends beating, raping, and threatening them with guns, and consistently lying to child welfare workers about the abuse. In many instances this abuse occurred in the context of caregiver substance abuse and/or mental health issues, often in addition to poverty and housing instability. In some cases youth felt safer sleeping on the streets than at home, and several expressed that family members didn't care that they had become homeless. One St. John's youth explained, "Having family that know you're homeless but don't do anything about it – that's a big, a BIG, issue."

When youth were asked what would have prevented their own homelessness, many explained the need for improved supports, services, and housing to address family conflict, abuse, and neglect. Youth ranged in their opinions of what these services should look like, with some wanting family mediation supports and others wanting to be removed from the home and provided with housing and supports.

*"I don't speak for everybody, but the majority of people I interacted with that ended up homeless as youth, were a direct representation of what their parents did, or what their parents had involved in their lives. And maybe there were just no programs for the parents without that fear lingering that they're going to lose their kids. That's something that's really serious. I know – as a mom, I would never – if I knew I was doing something wrong – I would never open up and ask for help because I know my child would be at risk for being taken away."*

CALGARY YOUTH

**Across all focus groups, however, youth emphasized the importance of providing youth with choices as to what services, supports, and housing would help them deal with familial conflict and violence.**

# ADDRESSING FAMILY CONFLICT, ABUSE, & NEGLECT: Youth's Proposed Solutions

## Policy & System Change

- Place youth experiencing abuse or neglect on housing waitlists immediately
- Enable youth under 16 to access services, supports, and housing without alerting their caregiver(s)
- Remove time limits on accessing public housing
- Abolish or alter child welfare policies that prioritize keeping families together at all costs, particularly in cases of abuse

## Investments

- Build more safe houses for youth experiencing abuse
- Expand available youth housing in all communities
- Increase funding for family mediation and counselling services

## Professional Conduct & Training

- Educate teachers on how to better support students experiencing abuse
- Ensure all professionals supporting young people dealing with family conflict, abuse, or neglect are non-judgmental and trained in trauma-informed care and anti-oppression

## Interventions

- Provide access to free courses and support groups on parenting and life skills, targeted to young people and parents struggling with poverty, addiction, and/or mental health issues
- Provide caregivers with workers who can support them to improve their parenting
- Provide school-based education to all youth on how to identify abuse
- Provide free family counselling and mediation, including for foster families
- Educate caregivers on alternatives to kicking youth out of their home
- Provide free counseling to all youth who have experienced childhood abuse and neglect
- Offer supportive programs and education (e.g., seminars, peer support groups) for young people who have experienced abuse (including young men who have experienced abuse)
- Provide peer supports and support groups for people who have perpetrated familial violence

## MOVING FORWARD

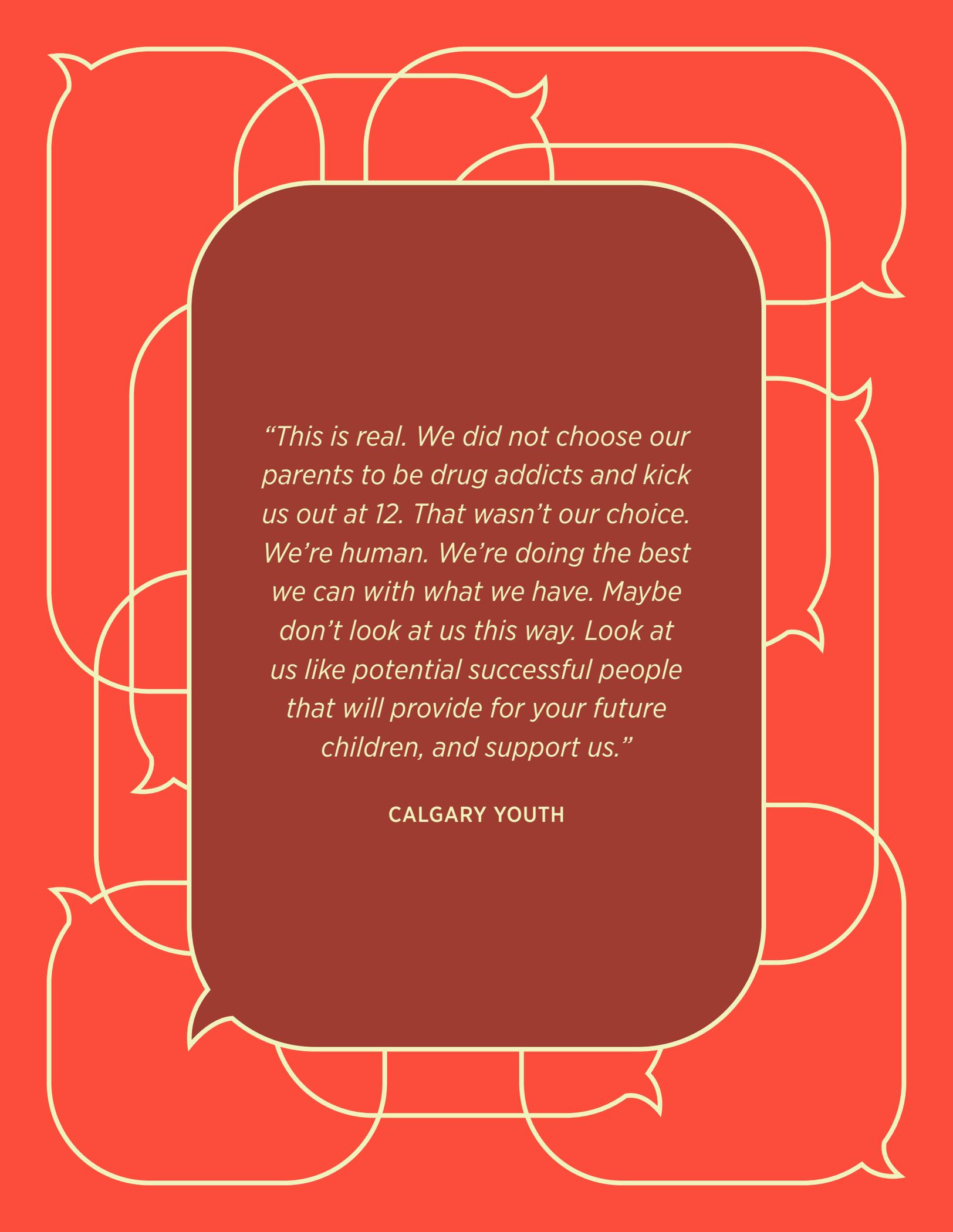
In youth's discussions of violence, both in their homes and in their communities, it was clear that youth often felt they lacked access to necessary support, and that available services often didn't allow them choice, agency, or control over how the violence was responded to. The frequency with which youth across the country shared this experience underscores the need for interventions that are youth-focused and position youth as experts in their own lives. Importantly, youth also emphasized the importance of acting early to provide youth with options for services and housing, and ensuring supports are in place for youth who need to leave their homes quickly to escape violence. Youth requested that many institutions have the knowledge and infrastructure to provide accessible pathways to these services and housing, including schools, libraries, faith institutions, cultural centres, community centres, all in addition to social services available through the youth homelessness sector.

**These services must be culturally safe and appropriate, and be provided by highly skilled professionals with a trauma-informed approach to care.**

*"I think one of the key things for preventing youth homelessness is educating parents what would actually happen. And maybe educate them [by] saying, 'Hey, maybe if you want your kid to do a certain thing, maybe making them homeless is probably not going to do exactly what you want.'"*

CALGARY YOUTH

Youth also emphasized that the difficulties they face are often inextricably linked to the challenges experienced by their caregivers. This means that preventing youth homelessness must involve interventions that support both families and caregivers themselves, including through education, counseling, and mediation. A key finding of [Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey](#) was that among Canadian youth who are homeless, 77.3% would like to improve relationships with their families. This means that family mediation and counseling are important both before and after a young person becomes homeless. These interventions must occur in tandem with providing families with the necessities that all people need to build healthy relationships: livable income, adequate and affordable housing, and access to healthy foods.



*“This is real. We did not choose our parents to be drug addicts and kick us out at 12. That wasn’t our choice. We’re human. We’re doing the best we can with what we have. Maybe don’t look at us this way. Look at us like potential successful people that will provide for your future children, and support us.”*

**CALGARY YOUTH**

## 3.2 PERSONAL & FAMILY CRISES

Personal or family crises related to health, mental health, and addictions are important contributors to homelessness for many young people. As discussed above, homelessness is often linked to these experiences because of system failures and structural factors, such as discrimination, lack of services, and lack of affordable housing. However, youth also explained that these challenges were also deeply personal and interpersonal.

In addition to system change, youth stressed the need for improved interventions and supports for themselves and their families.

**For many young people, their own challenges with health, mental health, or addictions were preceded by challenges that their parents faced in these areas that went unsupported.**

Several youth specifically mentioned that caregivers were often wary of seeking help because they feared legal repercussions or having their children removed. These challenges were often intensified by the stigma associated with addiction and mental health issues, causing some young people to hide these family challenges.

A few youth also discussed the difficulties they faced related to their caregivers' health or disabilities, explaining that supports for these family members were often unavailable or insufficient.

## Lack of services and supports also made youth's own mental health and addictions challenges more difficult, both before and after becoming homeless.

Youth reported that there were few services, rehabs, detox centres, or housing programs for youth with addictions, especially in smaller communities. Available services often had long waitlists, which some youth viewed as life threatening. Youth also viewed the lack of available safe injection sites as very dangerous, with several youth discussing how hard it was to manage their addiction on the streets. Fortunately, youth also reported that some social services provided crucial mental health supports that saved their lives. This was often contrasted with the broader social stigma and discrimination they perceived in their community.

*“Say you’re a parent, and you’re addicted to drugs and you want to provide your kid with every opportunity, but you don’t have those incentives available. You’re not going to ask for help if you know you’re going to lose your kid. You need to have a safe place to go to, at the end of the day. I’m not doing drugs, and I’m scared to talk about what I’d do with my mental health because my kid can get taken away ... You need to have somewhere safe where you can say, ‘I am in trouble, I am broken, I need help, I have chosen drugs, or steaming, or this path instead of asking for help and now it’s too late, I need help. Please do not through me in jail or take my kids away, please just help me.’ That’s not there. That’s just not there. That needs to happen.”*

CALGARY YOUTH

# ADDRESSING PERSONAL & FAMILY CRISES: Youth's Proposed Solutions

## Policy & System Change

- Ensure the immediate provision of services for youth seeking support for mental health and addiction issues
- Reduce wait times to access in-patient addiction and mental health services for youth
- Abolish policies that require parental permission for youth to access addiction or mental health services
- Ensure there are robust, youth-centred after care plans for youth transitioning out of hospitals, rehabilitation centres, detox centres, and recovery houses

## Investments

- Establish more safe injection sites across Canada, and ensure sites are youth-friendly and safe for youth
- Build youth-focused detox and rehabilitation centres in all communities, particularly rural communities
- Fund and expand youth housing for people recovering from addictions

## Interventions

- Locate addiction services and supports away from locations where substance use is common (e.g. bars)
- Offer programs and services in which caregivers struggling with addictions and/or mental health issues can access help without fear of criminalization or having their children removed
- Increase the availability of drug management programs for caregivers
- Increase the availability of programs and counselling for youth with addictions, particularly in rural and remote communities
- Provide education on housing and homelessness to caregivers accessing mental health and addiction support programs
- Provide peer mentorship programs for youth struggling with addiction and mental health issues

## MOVING FORWARD

Youth across the country were clear: to prevent youth homelessness, we need to provide young people with mental health and addiction supports that are visible, accessible, immediate, and free before they become homeless, as well as during and after. Further, it is essential that caregivers have safe and accessible spaces in which to address their mental health and addiction issues without fear of legal repercussions. Several youth identified that these supports would have prevented their own homelessness, particularly when combined with family mediation and income supports.

When young people talked about agencies that really helped them, they also emphasized the importance of fostering a culture of acceptance, destigmatization, peer mentorship, cultural connection, and a focus on youth's talents and goals. These findings demonstrate that mental health and addiction services need to adopt a positive youth development approach, focused on youth's assets and skills, rather than just the challenges they face.

*“That’s something that I struggle with, like, how do you make it [mental illness] more acceptable? Because when I come around [agency], when I come around these places, I feel accepted. This is my tribe. I can be myself. But then outside of those doors, it’s kinda like, I don’t know how to be myself. I don’t know how to talk about this now. I have to be this strong, resilient person and that’s scary because in one instance, I know that I’m accepted and loved and whatever I go through, I know there’s going to be supports. But then when I step outside of those doors, it’s like, shit, now I’m judged, and I can’t talk about it, and I’m silenced.”*

ST. JOHN'S YOUTH

## 3.3. SOCIAL EXCLUSION & ISOLATION

Feeling excluded, isolated, and alone was frequently raised in focus groups with youth, particularly in smaller communities or those lacking services.

For many young people, these experiences began at home with feelings of neglect and abandonment. Some young people tried to avoid violence or poverty at home, but often had nowhere to go and no funds to get there. These experiences continued on the streets for many, with youth reporting that they were “entirely alone,” “had to figure out everything alone,” and “had nobody.” When asked if they had anyone to help them figure out what to do once they became homeless, *almost all youth across the country said they had no one.*

This isolation often intersected with bias-based discrimination and stigmatization on the basis of class, mental health status, disability, sexuality, race, and other identities. Youth recounted painful memories of being kicked out of public spaces and businesses on these bases, sometimes under threat of arrest. Youth reported there were few free spaces where they could positively engage with peers, rest, practice their hobbies, showcase their talents, or simply hang out. In the absence of spaces that were safe, free, non-judgmental, and non-discriminatory, youth felt that mental health and addiction issues often developed or worsened.

*“If you do become homeless, um, it’s a really surreal feeling, really, like intellectually, like emotionally, like you’re really unstable ... once you become homeless, it doesn’t quite register, like, click right away, right? You’re tired, I want to go home, but I don’t have a home. Where am I supposed to go, right?”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

## **ADDRESSING SOCIAL EXCLUSION & ISOLATION: Youth's Proposed Solutions**

### **Policy & System Change**

- Establish youth councils and advocacy groups at social service agencies
- Provide an advocate for all youth who experience homelessness

### **Investments**

- Increase funding to build recreational spaces, such as community centres, libraries, or gyms, that are free to access, without time limits, and offer programming for diverse ages, particularly in rural communities
- Build “community hubs” which provide co-located services, supports, community-building programming, education, and recreation for young people
- Build and fund more Friendship Centres

### **Interventions**

- Offer peer mentorship programs to all youth at risk of homelessness, including those targeted to the needs of Indigenous youth
- Assign a system navigator to all youth who experience homelessness
- Invest in recreational programs embedded in social services that foster community and positive peer relationships
- Expand and fund programming that connects Indigenous youth to their community, culture, history, and traditions

## MOVING FORWARD

All people long for connection and community – it inspires us, provides us with a sense of security and belonging, and helps us become better versions of ourselves. Connection and community are particularly important for young people who face exclusion on the basis of their identities, experiences, or challenges (Abramovich, 2012).

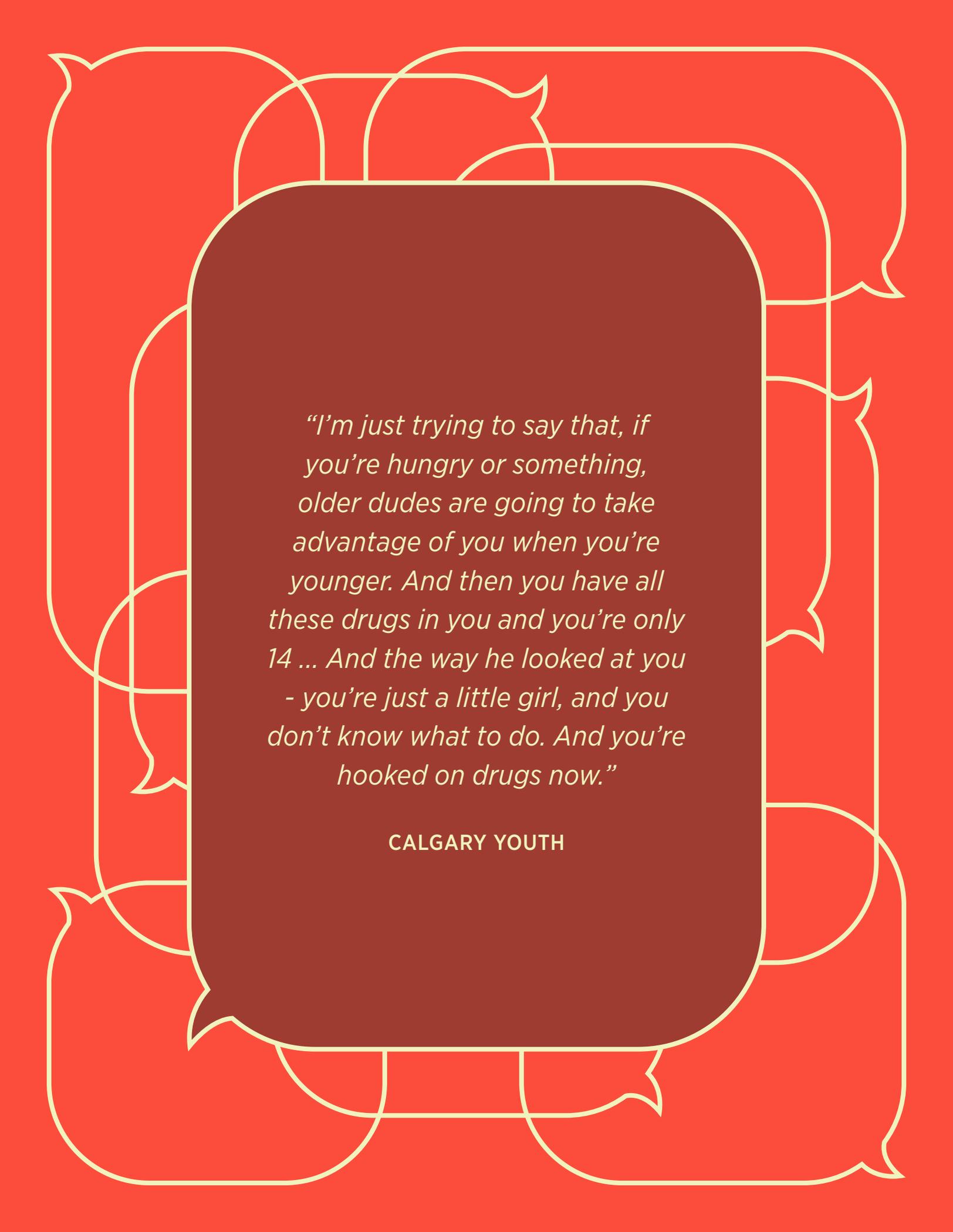
### **In the absence of community spaces, youth reported that some young people turn to gangs, drug use, or sex work in order to feel connected with others.**

These findings suggest that the provision of recreational and community spaces are an important component of youth homelessness prevention. Many youth were enthusiastic about the development of “community hubs” in their communities; spaces where they could access services, get involved in local politics, create art, join a sports team, learn about healthy relationships, grow community gardens, reengage with education and employment, and build positive relationships with peers and adults. Indigenous youth also discussed the importance of funding Indigenous Friendship Centres and community spaces, particularly because colonial violence has disrupted many Indigenous youth’s connections to their culture, community, and heritage (Thistle, 2017).

More broadly, it is important that staff and leaders in youth-serving systems (e.g., child welfare, youth homelessness sector, healthcare) consider how their organizational culture, approach, and structure can provide opportunities to build bridges between youth experiencing homelessness and the broader community.

*“There are places where kids can go and play basketball but it’s terrifying and drug-ridden to go to, so why would someone go there in the first place? ... Being able to have those services where kids could say, ‘yeah, my mom’s off doing this all night, and I have nowhere to go, I don’t have this or that, at least I have somewhere to go that’s safe.’ That’s not running away from home, and that feels safe - not somewhere that’s rundown.”*

CALGARY YOUTH



*“I’m just trying to say that, if you’re hungry or something, older dudes are going to take advantage of you when you’re younger. And then you have all these drugs in you and you’re only 14 ... And the way he looked at you - you’re just a little girl, and you don’t know what to do. And you’re hooked on drugs now.”*

**CALGARY YOUTH**

## 3.4 VIOLENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

The risk of violence is a part of everyday life for many youth – both at home and in their communities. Some youth talked about areas in their city where casual physical and sexual violence was common, gangs recruited poor or homeless youth, and young people were encouraged or forced to engage in drug use and/or drug dealing. Participants explained that youth who are homeless are often extremely vulnerable to these forces, particularly when they are chased out of safer areas by businesses or police officers. Several youth from smaller communities discussed seeking help from the police when they experienced community violence, but were refused help and were not taken seriously. Not surprisingly, these youth reported that they had to turn to violence in order to protect themselves.

**For several youth, this violence was invited into their homes, or forced its way in, when they were children.**

For others, community violence and crime was common in their building or neighbourhood. Some schools were also dangerous, fostering gang activity, underage sex work, and drug cultures on school grounds. Once on the streets, youth's desperation for a place to sleep and eat made them vulnerable to people who take advantage of those needs. Young women particularly discussed how common sexual violence was in their lives, both before and after becoming homeless.

*“What would have stopped me from becoming homeless – if my social worker would have listened to me. And moved me out of a place where some really dangerous, drug addicted criminals were coming to and getting free access into the building, because the fucking front foyer wasn't locking. So, they were coming into my place and coming in with weapons, and drugs, and threatening me, and basically turning my place into a fucking crack shack, and trap house and flophouse. I asked my social worker to move me because I was having a lot of problems and whatnot, and these people were threatening to kill me, but wouldn't do it and finally, they just blow up.”*

EDMONTON YOUTH

## **ADDRESSING VIOLENCE IN THE COMMUNITY: Youth's Proposed Solutions**

### **Policy & System Change**

- Create policies that will help end violence against young people of all genders, including young girls specifically
- Legalize and regulate sex work and marijuana
- Run awareness campaigns on available legal resources and supports for youth and for those experiencing criminal victimization

### **Investments**

- Increase the availability of crisis interventions and housing for families and youth experiencing violence
- Increase access to free legal services and supports for youth who are victims of crime
- Increase the availability of non-judgmental spaces and services where young people can talk about experiences of abuse

### **Interventions**

- Offer programs to support young people's self-esteem, self-worth and self-respect
- Provide education and workshops in the community and in schools for young people on abuse and healthy relationships
- Educate youth on their human and legal rights

## MOVING FORWARD

Often isolated and desperate for resources and support, it is no surprise that young people who are marginalized or homeless experience violent victimization in their communities.

*I think ending the gangs that really take advantage of and exploit youth would really help in keeping—breaking the cycle of addiction and homelessness ... if we just depopulated them by giving youth other options other than gangs to like, feed themselves and to have a sense of community that they could be friends with...and defunding the gangs by regulating drugs and prostitution, which is two of their big areas of income. That could probably work really well.*

KAMLOOPS YOUTH

Unfortunately, research also demonstrates that these youth lack equal access to justice, legal supports, and legal protection, leaving them vulnerable to further marginalization and victimization (Gaetz, 2014). A particular concern is recent research demonstrating the alarming rate of human sex trafficking among youth who are homeless, particularly young women (Murphy, 2016) and Indigenous girls and women (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2014). In the face of these realities, it is essential to provide increased funding to targeted services, supports, housing, and outreach in order to end these experiences of violence for young people.

# YOUTH'S MESSAGES TO ALL LEVELS OF CANADIAN GOVERNMENT

*"I would like to tell the government ... the value of a society stems more from the way that it takes care of its oppressed people than its deficit."*

MONTREAL YOUTH

*"I'd say it's important for everyone to have a home and people can't get a proper job without having a home or being safe. So it's important to meet peoples' basic needs before you expect them to be able to function and work in society."*

VANCOUVER YOUTH

*"Stop making cuts at the level of social welfare, income taxes, and taxes... Quebec produces homelessness with their cuts."*

MONTREAL YOUTH

*"I think what I would say to the government is just to please continue to fight for our social programs. I am thankful for the social programs we do have. And I hope that they continue to get better."*

CALGARY YOUTH

*"The government should be there for the people, not just protecting them, but wanting to take care of their people. It has to respect their people and their community as much as it wants to be respected by them. So, when there is a problem or an issue or anything, it shouldn't treat people like they're animals. Like, it has to give value to the people."*

TORONTO YOUTH

*"Youth are here now, and are the future and face of the community."*

HAMILTON YOUTH

*"It needs to be brought on the table as an urgent matter because if it's not being taken seriously, no one's going to pay attention to it."*

ST. JOHN'S YOUTH

*"Invest more money into it, please. Like, programs are underfunded."*

EDMONTON YOUTH

*"They hear you, but they don't listen. They need to listen."*

MONTREAL YOUTH

*"I just think, as a general rule, that, you know, the government may think that they know a lot about this subject and everything but unless they have advisories that have already been homeless or have several of some of the same issues, it's much different."*

KAMLOOPS YOUTH

*"Listen to the kids... Power to the people."*

EDMONTON YOUTH

*"What I would tell the Canadian government is to start listening more to what's going on. Yes, there are other issues going on, but you guys want to help prevent homelessness, then listen to the people that are coming and talking to you"*

CALGARY YOUTH

# PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

**Many young people can pinpoint the key moment or intervention that could have changed their path into homelessness.**

These young people have showed us the urgent work needed to end youth homelessness, and their voices and wisdom must guide the shift towards homelessness prevention in Canada. Youth's voices have shaped the forthcoming Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness, and should serve as an opportunity for all levels of government to enhance and adapt their system interventions.

One message from youth stood out:

*We are waiting too long to intervene when a young person is at risk of homelessness.*

Youth showed us that by building a response that is primarily reactive, we not only condemn them to hardship and trauma, we actually *ensure* it by refusing to provide the resources, services, and supports they need until after they become homeless.

**Importantly, youth explained that both structural and system change is needed to prevent youth homelessness.**

We cannot rely exclusively on programmatic interventions targeted to individuals or families and expect to end youth homelessness.

We need to dramatically shift our approach to youth homelessness in order to ensure our public systems no longer contribute to the problem.

Systems change is difficult work, requiring an integrated systems approach wherein multiple departments across governments work collectively towards the goal of better outcomes for youth. This requires expanding the role of systems like education and healthcare, as well as re-defining who “owns” the issue of youth homelessness. Many systems do not see themselves as responsible for ensuring young people are housed, and do not have the mandate, resources, or tools to do this work. However, it is clear that assigning sole responsibility of this issue to the youth homelessness sector makes it very difficult to prevent homelessness before it happens.

**Homelessness prevention thus must go hand-in-hand with the tough work of redefining how systems and institutions operate and see themselves.**

Youth showed us the crucial role that public systems workers play in their trajectory into, and out of, homelessness. As we move towards an integrated systems approach, it is essential that we *scale up, scale out, and scale deep*.

**This means we must simultaneously make changes at broad policy levels, foster change across all systems and communities, and ensure frontline workers have the tools, training, supports, and workload to engage in this shift.**

To do so, we need to tackle how workers’ roles and positions in some systems may change during the shift to prevention. Often a shift in organizational culture is required, and this can be very difficult work. Paramount to this shift is mobilizing the knowledge and experience of the sector to ensure that workers are equipped to implement preventative services and supports that produce better outcomes for young people.

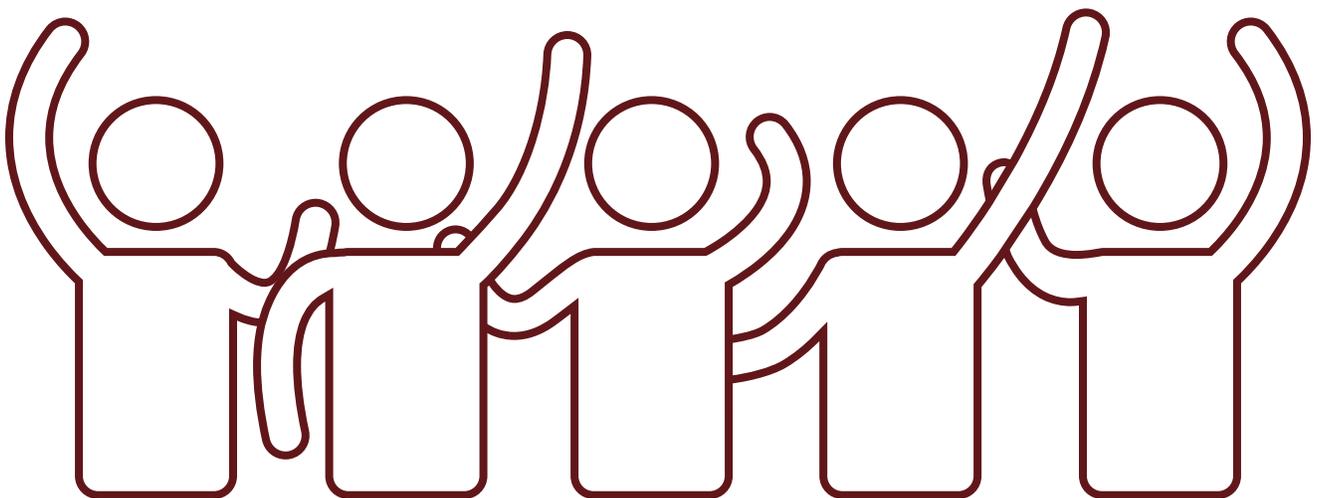
**Most importantly, a human rights approach should guide all of our efforts.**

A human rights approach prevents homelessness by coordinating programs and targeting policies that may perpetuate or support homelessness.

It looks beyond the physical needs of homeless youth to their social, cultural, political, and emotional needs by recognizing them as equal citizens with a right to dignity and full participation. The Proposed Solutions and Recommendations within this document should encourage governments to think about their cross-system responses and highlight where they need to strengthen and dovetail services and supports for these young people. If systems are not carefully designed and executed to integrate with supports and services offered by other systems, they will continue to leave young people stranded and without support.

## The youth homelessness sector cannot end youth homelessness alone.

To reach our common goal, we will require ongoing collaboration and continued investments to help our youth achieve their greatest potential as they transition into adulthood. As a companion to Housing First for Youth, a concerted effort to address homelessness prevention will bring us much closer to the realizable goal of ending youth homelessness.



# RECOMMENDATIONS<sup>1</sup>

## GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

1. Implement a Federal Strategy to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness with ambitious targets, supported by a targeted investment. This strategy should be grounded in a commitment to making Canada a world leader in preventing youth homelessness.

### **This Strategy should:**

- a) Advance and implement housing as a human right for all youth, regardless of citizenship status.
- b) Adopt a national goal of ending homelessness with clear and measurable outcomes, milestones, and criteria, as outlined in Opportunity Knocks: Prioritizing Canada's Most Vulnerable Youth.
- c) Implement an independent review process to assess progress towards ending youth homelessness in Canada.
- d) Identify and advance program interventions that focus specifically on intervening well before a young person experiences homelessness, and exiting youth from homelessness as rapidly as possible.
- e) Identify and advance policies and practices that proactively address the unique needs of particular populations deemed to be at greater risk of homelessness, including Indigenous youth, racialized youth, newcomer youth, and youth who identify as LGBTQ2S+.
- f) Implement a focused prevention strategy to support young people who are under 16 and at risk of homelessness, supported by targeted investments.
- g) Work with Indigenous communities to develop and implement a focused homelessness prevention strategy for Indigenous youth and their families, supported by targeted investments.
- h) Prioritize the development of broad-based assessment tools and strategies to determine risk of homelessness for youth, in partnership with provinces, territories, and Indigenous governments.
- i) Meaningfully involve young people with lived experience in the creation and monitoring of this Strategy, compensating them for their work.

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<sup>1</sup>These recommendations draw from and build upon recommendations identified in Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey; Mental Health Care for Homeless Youth: A Proposal for Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Leadership, Coordination, and Targeted Investment; Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action; and Opportunity Knocks: Prioritizing Canada's Most Vulnerable Youth. We wish to thank all authors of these documents for their insights, and hope this document will extend the impact of their work.

2. In renewing the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, the Government of Canada should ensure that youth homelessness and prevention are prioritized and supported by:

- Targeted investments
- Directives that support community implementation of youth-focused interventions, including Housing First for Youth
- A requirement that community systems plans include a targeted youth strategy

3. Embed youth homelessness prevention within the Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy, ensuring that the Strategy provides the social and material supports needed to effectively reduce poverty, housing need, and food insecurity among families with youth.

4. Ensure the housing needs of all youth and their families are adequately addressed and resourced through the National Housing Strategy.

- The NHS should provide additional investments to support communities to implement youth-focused models of housing, such as Housing First for Youth, grounded in principles of youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination.

**This should include:**

- a) Dramatically increasing the availability, affordability, and adequacy of housing in Indigenous communities and on reserves across Canada, enabling youth and their families to remain in their home communities (if they so desire).
- b) Working with provinces, territories, and communities to increase the availability and portability of the Canada Housing Benefit to best meet the needs of youth and families at risk of homelessness.
- c) Addressing affordability challenges for youth and their families using multiple policy tools, including rent subsidies, the building of social housing, increased regulation of development and speculation, and the protection of existing affordable rental housing units.
- d) Encouraging the creation of youth-focused social housing stock.

5. Align ministerial, departmental, and program mandates and funding in order to more collaboratively prevent youth homelessness across Canada.

**This should include:**

- a) Identifying provincial/territorial and federal inter-ministerial opportunities for collaboration and improved service and system coordination in order to more effectively prevent homelessness for youth.
- b) Identifying evidence-based indicators of systems integration and diversion of youth from experiences of homelessness.
- c) Developing tools and metrics that provinces/territories and communities can use to assess system integration and improved youth homelessness prevention locally.
- d) Creating a federal/provincial/territorial/Indigenous planning table to address the needs of youth who are at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness.

6. Foster meaningful youth engagement in all federal policy development, planning, and implementation processes related to preventing youth homelessness. Ensure the provision of necessary supports (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.

**This should include the creation of:**

- a) A Youth Advisory Table to guide the development of the Youth Homelessness Prevention Strategy, as well as advise federal leadership on other policies that have implications for youth experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Youth with lived experience of homelessness must be properly supported to effectively participate in this work.
- b) Mechanisms through which children and youth can dialogue with federal leaders on all policy and programming that affects their lives, as well as mechanisms for redress.

7. Eliminate all policies, laws, and protocols that directly or indirectly discriminate against youth or their families on the basis of their housing status.

8. Provide additional investments to support Indigenous-led reforms of child protection, as outlined in the [Calls to Actions](#) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness: A Proposal for Action](#).
9. Revise the Youth Criminal Justice Act's Judicial Measures and Sentencing to ensure a focus on the decriminalization of youth experiencing homelessness, and that courts follow the directive that judges must consider the youth's ability to pay before a fine is levied.
10. Adopt a national research strategy focused on youth homelessness in order to advance an integrated systems response to preventing youth homelessness, as outlined in [Opportunity Knocks: Prioritizing Canada's Most Vulnerable Youth](#).
11. Implement cross-ministerial engagement and investment to support a youth homelessness strategy, with co-funded programs supported by Employment and Social Development Canada, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, the Department of Justice, Health Canada, Status of Women Canada, and other relevant ministries and departments.

## PROVINCES/TERRITORIES

1. Implement a Provincial/Territorial Strategy to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness, supported by a targeted investment.

### **This Strategy should:**

- a) Ensure provincial/territorial strategies explicitly reference the human rights of youth experiencing homelessness.
- b) Adopt a provincial/territorial goal of ending youth homelessness with clear and measurable outcomes, milestones, and criteria.
- c) Implement an independent review process to assess progress towards ending youth homelessness within the province/territory.
- d) Work with communities to develop plans to prevent and end youth homelessness, with a particular emphasis on intervening well before a young person experiences homelessness, and exiting youth from homelessness as rapidly as possible.
- e) Work with communities to implement policies and practices that proactively address the unique needs of particular populations deemed to be at greater risk of homelessness, including Indigenous youth, racialized youth, newcomer youth, and youth who identify as LGBTQ2S+.
- f) Implement a focused prevention strategy to support young people who are under 16 and at risk of homelessness, supported by targeted investments.
- g) Work with Indigenous communities to develop and implement a focused homelessness prevention strategy for Indigenous youth and their families, supported by targeted investments.

2. Embed youth homelessness prevention within Provincial/Territorial Poverty Reduction Strategies, ensuring that the Strategy provides the social and material supports to reduce poverty, housing need, and food insecurity among families with youth.
3. In liaison with the federal government, establish provincial/territorial service standards in the area of youth homelessness, which in turn can be tracked provincially to inform funding decisions.
4. Prioritize and support systems integration (where appropriate) in all efforts to proactively address the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. As part of this systems integration, all provincial/territorial ministries and departments should be mandated to identify their roles and responsibilities in addressing youth homelessness.

**This should be achieved through:**

- a) Requiring that all ministries and departments adopt a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to supporting youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.
  - b) The development and employment of a standardized assessment tool that can be used across systems to assist in determining homelessness risk for youth.
  - c) Collaboration across departments, ministries, and sectors by establishing inter-ministerial planning tables to coordinate activities within government and hold each ministry accountable for the roles they play in outcomes for youth.
  - d) The promotion of strategic partnerships between youth-serving organizations and agencies, schools, health care providers, child protection services, law enforcement, and other institutions which interact with young people.
  - e) Collaboration with communities to rapidly divert youth from homelessness and create rapid pathways out of homelessness for youth.
5. Invest in provincial/territorial knowledge development and data management specific to youth homelessness in order to advance an integrated systems approach to youth homelessness prevention.

**This should include the establishment of:**

- a) A provincial/territorial approach to gathering comparable data by establishing common and consistent data collection and data sharing methods, in partnership with the federal government.
- b) Information sharing agreements with youth-serving organizations to facilitate improved systems integration (where appropriate).

6. Engage in the ongoing review of current system barriers to assess how the prevention of youth homelessness can be improved across systems, including through integration (where appropriate) and improved access to services, supports, and housing for youth and their families.

**This should include:**

- a) Ongoing jurisdictional reviews to ensure provincial/territorial legislation and policy does not become a barrier to accessing services and supports for youth experiencing homelessness (e.g., age cut offs that deny services and supports to young people based on the assumption that they are currently in the care of parents or guardians).
- b) That facilitators/program staff are mindful of participants' wishes regarding the need to obtain parental/caregiver permission in order to access health, mental health, and addiction services, supports, and programs.

7. Foster meaningful youth engagement in all provincial/territorial policy development, planning, and implementation processes that affect youth at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness. Ensure the provision of necessary supports (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.

8. Create provincial/territorial housing and shelter standards that meet the diverse needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, developed in partnership with youth and Indigenous communities.

9. Support communities to implement harm reduction models that focus on reducing the risks or harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive or other behaviours that pose risks for youth.

# INTEGRATED GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS

1. Work across ministries, departments, systems, and sectors to employ an integrated systems approach to proactively address the diverse needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.
2. Implement policy, strategies, training, and accountability mechanisms to support anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, solutions- and equity-oriented practice among frontline and managerial staff in all public systems who work with youth. All systems should develop targeted approaches to meet the needs of youth who are often served least well by public systems. Systems should be particularly attentive to ensuring equity for youth with disabilities, youth with mental health and addiction challenges, Indigenous youth, poor youth, youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, and youth experiencing abuse and neglect.
3. Provide integrated, ongoing, and meaningful training and supports for all system workers to ensure staff employ equitable, evidence-based practices in their interactions with the youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Training and supports must be adequately resourced with targeted investments, enabling workers sufficient time and supports to ensure their approach aligns with evidence-based practices.

## **Supported by policy and accountability mechanisms, this training must support system workers to:**

- a) Employ a standardized assessment tool to assist in determinations of homelessness risk for youth.
- b) Employ a proactive approach to responding to youth at risk of homelessness, rapidly connecting youth to supports, services, and/or housing.
- c) Adopt an approach grounded in trauma-informed care, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, anti-oppression, cultural competency, and respect for the human rights of youth.
- d) Mobilize the principles of youth voice, youth choice, and self-determination in their work with youth.
- e) Employ equitable, evidence-based approaches to supporting youth with disabilities, addictions, or mental health issues.
- f) Rapidly connect youth experiencing health, mental health, or addiction issues to appropriate supports and services.

4. Adopt accountability mechanisms to assess the system's progress towards proactively addressing the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.
5. Implement highly accessible mechanisms through which children and youth, and their caregivers or advocates, can report system failures, violations of their rights, and failures of system actors to respond ethically, adequately, or equitably.

**Within all systems, such a mechanism must:**

- a) Be highly accessible to children and youth of all ages, as well as youth with disabilities or literacy challenges.
  - b) Not require that a caregiver provide permission, or be present, for a child or youth to lodge a complaint.
  - c) Ensure that all redress mechanisms are impartial, equitable, prompt, and accountable to youth and their families.
6. Work across departments, ministries, and sectors to ensure housing stability and ongoing supports and services for young people who are transitioning from mental health care, child protection services, and corrections. This must involve harmonizing data and assessment tools to ensure youth leaving systems of care do not transition into homelessness.

## **PROVINCIAL/TERRITORIAL DEPARTMENTS & MINISTRIES**

### **Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Education**

1. Convene and/or participate in cross-ministerial planning tables in order to better coordinate supports, services, and educational attainment for young people at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.
2. Mandate that all school boards support early intervention strategies to prevent youth homelessness, in collaboration with community organizations. Schools should consider adopting 'hub' models in partnership with community agencies, enabling youth to access services and supports within the school environment.

3. Require that all school boards adopt policies, protocols, and practices to support the educational attainment and engagement of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. This should include:
  - a) Reviewing policies and procedures to ensure they do not create barriers to education for precariously housed youth.
  - b) Mandating that all elementary and secondary schools implement innovative, flexible, and evidence-based programming and/or curriculum to ensure youth at risk of homelessness are able to remain engaged and enrolled in school.
  - c) A strong commitment to providing alternatives to suspending or expelling students, particularly in cases in which young people are forced to engage in subaltern forms of work in order to make ends meet (e.g., drug dealing, sex work), or are struggling with mental health or addiction issues.
  - d) The provision of rapid pathways through which students can challenge suspensions, expulsions, and experiences of inequity and discrimination within the school system.
  - e) Adoption of a harm reduction approach in all schools.
  
4. Mandate that all elementary and secondary schools offer mental health services within the school, provided by highly trained professionals. This work should:
  - a) Be supported by targeted investments sufficient to meet the needs of all students.
  - b) Enable all children and youth to self-refer to mental health services, and ensure access to services is not predicated on caregiver permission and does not require that caregiver(s) be informed.
  - c) Require that mental health professionals are trained in anti-oppression, cultural competency, trauma-informed care, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, and employ a positive youth development approach.
  - d) Ensure mental health professionals are given an appropriate caseload in order to effectively support all students under their care, and that all schools are provided with a sufficient number of professionals relative to school size.
  - e) Ensure that students are accurately screened for mental health challenges, disabilities, and learning needs.

5. Provide ongoing education and training for teachers and school staff on how to support students at risk of homelessness, experiencing homelessness, or facing other challenges in their lives (e.g., abuse, neglect, mental health challenges). This should include:
  - a) Training on anti-oppression, cultural competency, trauma-informed care, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, and empathy.
  - b) Training on how to identify abuse and neglect among students, and how best to support and refer students experiencing abuse and neglect.
  - c) Education on available services and supports for youth in the community, and how to best connect students to these supports.
  
6. Develop targeted curriculum, courses, programs, and/or workshops that prepare young people for independent, healthy lives. This should include education on:
  - a) Healthy relationships, abuse, self-esteem, and sexual consent.
  - b) Young people's human and legal rights, including access to legal supports.
  - c) Life skills (e.g., paying bills and taxes, cooking, budgeting).

## **Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Children and Youth**

1. Ensure young people in the child welfare system experience safe, appropriate, and stable housing, as outlined in [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#).
  
2. Identify opportunities for collaboration and improved service coordination between the child welfare system and other ministries and departments (for instance, between education, child and family services, and health and justice).
  
3. Work with other ministries and departments to implement laws, practices, and policies that focus on prevention and early intervention within the family, including through the provision of family mediation, conflict resolution, violence prevention, and mental health and addiction supports.
  
4. Implement an After Care Guarantee for all youth with child welfare involvement, providing ongoing support (as needed) until a young person reaches the age of 25, as outlined in [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#).

5. Offer comprehensive, youth-focused supports for youth leaving child protection, foster care, and group homes, ensuring a range of flexible housing options, such as co-op housing, transitional housing, supportive housing, and independent housing, as is outlined in [THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide](#). Youth should not be transitioned out of care without housing and supports in place.
6. Review all child welfare policies and practices to ensure that supports and services equitably and adequately meet the needs of youth from equity-seeking groups and youth facing multiple challenges, including mental health challenges, disabilities, precarious citizenship status, and criminal justice involvement.
7. Ensure that child welfare workers' responses to abuse and neglect are grounded in the human rights of all young people and founded on the principles of youth voice, youth choice, and self-determination. Accountability mechanisms must be put in place to ensure these principles are guiding workers' responses, and all youth must have immediate access to complaint processes and redress mechanisms that are impartial, equitable, prompt, and accountable to youth and their families.
8. Ensure all child welfare workers have the appropriate training, education, caseload, and supports to carry out their important work and best serve the youth in their care. Ensure all child welfare workers receive ongoing training on anti-oppression, cultural competency, trauma-informed care, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, and empathy.
9. Given the overrepresentation of Indigenous and POC youth in the child welfare system, all ministries must recognize and concretely address the structural racism that drives the removal of children of colour and Indigenous children from their homes and into state care, in turn increasing the likelihood that they will experience homelessness. To that end, all ministries must support Indigenous-led reforms of child protection, as outlined in the [Calls to Actions](#) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness: A Proposal for Action](#).

## Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Justice

1. Ensure all young people who exit corrections (either the juvenile or adult systems) have immediate access to housing and supports to facilitate reintegration, and that all young people are meaningfully supported to create a reintegration plan prior to exiting corrections.
2. Collaborate with all youth-serving sectors and systems to create a safety strategy to reduce the risk of criminal victimization of youth who are homeless, establishing special mechanisms to address victimization committed by police and organized criminal organizations.
3. Increase access to free legal representation and legal outreach for youth experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Legal representatives should be qualified to provide legal support for the numerous issues this population often faces (e.g., unlawful eviction, workplace discrimination, sexual violence) and should employ a human rights approach.
4. In sentencing young people who have experienced homelessness or poverty, judges and juries must take into consideration the socio-economic context within which the crime was committed. Alternatives to incarceration should be considered, particularly when young people engage in non-violent criminal activities in order to survive (e.g., robbery).
5. Restorative justice approaches must be considered in response to all Indigenous young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system.
6. Increase the enforcement of laws against domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and sex trafficking, ensuring that survivors of this violence are provided with swift access to justice and safety. This must include establishing accountability mechanisms in order to ensure that police officers follow appropriate protocols when responding to complaints of abuse, neglect, family conflict, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and sex trafficking.
7. Abolish laws that criminalize survival sex among young people at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

8. Systematically investigate and eliminate police practices that profile, target, and criminalize young people who are poor or experiencing homelessness. Actively support the reduction and elimination of legislation and policing practices that arbitrarily remove young people who are homeless from public spaces, issue tickets for loitering or vagrancy, or unlawfully destroy or remove their private property.
9. Establish accessible court procedures that allow young people debt forgiveness for ticketing charges.
10. Ensure that mechanisms to lodge complaints against police officers and other actors in the criminal justice system are highly accessible to youth experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Independent, impartial bodies that are sufficiently resourced must oversee these mechanisms.

## **Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Health**

1. Prioritize and support systems integration (where appropriate) in all efforts to address the health and mental health needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. To do so, Ministries must:
  - a) Invest in the provision of coordinated and integrated mental health and health supports and services at the community level, as outlined in Mental Health Care for Homeless Youth: A Proposal for Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Leadership, Coordination, and Targeted Investment.
  - b) Work across departments, ministries, and sectors by establishing inter-ministerial planning tables to coordinate activities within government and hold each ministry accountable for the roles they play in the health and mental health outcomes of youth experiencing homelessness. Led by provincial/territorial Ministries of Health, the mandate of these tables should be to ensure that no young person slips through the cracks.
2. Work with communities to ensure that a harm reduction approach is embedded within schools and all youth-serving organizations, agencies, programs, and initiatives.

3. Engage in the ongoing review of current system barriers to accessing health and mental health supports for youth at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness. Remove or alter identified barriers to accessing care, including cost, discrimination, citizenship, proof of identity, and other factors. Meaningfully involve youth with lived experience of homelessness in these reviews and the development of alternative health and mental health care delivery mechanisms (e.g., mobile health clinics, community health hubs).
4. Collaborate with communities to create rapid care access pathways for homeless youth and their families with severe health and mental health needs.
5. Develop and invest in capacity building initiatives which support medical professionals to better meet the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. These initiatives should span from community service direct care levels through to mainstream service domains (e.g., emergency rooms, first responders, etc.).
6. Expand the availability of youth-specific mental health and addictions supports and services, including youth-specific rehabilitation centres. Targeted investments should be made to increase the availability of mental health and addictions services in communities that often lack these services, including rural, remote, and Indigenous communities.

### **Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Income Supports**

1. Increase income supports to reflect the real costs of living in all communities, ensuring that young people and their families are not forced to live in poverty because they are unable to work (temporarily or permanently).
2. Increase income supports for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, ensuring these amounts are livable and enable these community members to meaningfully participate in civic life and their communities.
3. Increase the accessibility, simplicity, and speed of obtaining income supports of all kinds.
4. Implement policies and mechanisms to ensure that people who are transitioning between different forms of income supports are provided with income during the transition.

## Provincial/Territorial Ministries Responsible for Housing

1. Increase the availability of affordable housing and rent subsidies in all communities, including for young people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Ensure young people have equitable access to rent subsidies and are not screened out of supports on the basis of age. Simplify and expedite the application process for obtaining rent subsidies.
2. Work with municipalities and the community sector to create and sustain housing options for youth who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. Young people should have access to a range of housing options, including transitional housing, shared accommodation, independent living, and returning to their family home.
3. Apply the principles of Housing First for Youth, as outlined in [THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide](#), when developing and investing in housing for youth and their families.
4. Support the development and implementation of community respite and Host Home programs, which offer emergency housing in the community to young people in need of a safe place to sleep.
5. Increase investments in housing supports for persons with mental health challenges and/or addictions, offering a full range of supported and supportive housing options.
6. Develop, invest in, and implement evidence-based eviction prevention interventions to support young people and their families. Interventions should be highly accessible, immediate, and adequately financed to ensure all youth and families facing eviction are provided the supports they need to avoid homelessness.
7. Collaborate with the federal government and Indigenous communities to improve the availability and affordability of housing for Indigenous Peoples in all communities, supported by sufficient investments to ensure all Indigenous Peoples can access affordable, safe, and adequate housing.
8. In collaboration with provincial/territorial Human Rights Commissions, increase the enforcement of laws banning landlord discrimination against tenants in the rental housing market.
9. Implement and enforce inclusionary zoning regulations in all communities in order to sufficiently meet the demand for affordable housing in each community.
10. Implement rent regulations that prevent landlords from exorbitantly increasing the cost of rent.

## The Youth Homelessness Sector

1. Work with cross-systems stakeholders, municipalities, youth with lived experience, and “unusual suspects” (such as landlords) to develop and implement regional and community-based plans to prevent and end youth homelessness. These plans should align with existing poverty reduction plans, as well as plans to end homelessness writ large, utilizing knowledge in the sector to ensure that the diverse needs of youth are met.
2. Prioritize prevention and early intervention efforts that provide assistance well before a young person experiences homelessness, as well as immediate access to housing when a young person does become homeless. Ensure all staff are appropriately trained to do this work.
3. Ground all interventions, supports, and services for youth experiencing homelessness in a human rights approach and the principles of Housing First for Youth, as outlined in [THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide](#).
4. Systemically identify and remove policies and practices that create barriers to youth accessing services and supports within the youth homelessness sector. This should include altering or abolishing policies that require youth to:
  - a) Be homeless for a specified period of time before receiving help,
  - b) Meet a particular acuity standard in order to access services and supports,
  - c) Obtain parental permission in order to access services and supports,
  - d) Possess identity documents,
  - e) Engage in programming, education, or employment in order to receive supports, services, or benefits, or
  - f) Be 16 years of age or older in order to access services and supports.
5. Systematically identify and abolish any policies, protocols, or practices within homeless-serving agencies or organizations that discriminate against youth on the basis of their identity or life experiences.

6. Seek to provide highly integrated, 'one-stop,' barrier-free services to youth experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, in collaboration with other systems and sectors.
7. Implement a harm reduction approach within all services and supports delivered to youth at risk or experiencing homelessness, ensuring that staff are trained and supported to do this work.
8. Work with a range of sectors (e.g., healthcare, education) to dramatically increase public awareness of available services for young people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. This should include efforts to ensure professionals in a range of positions (e.g., doctors, teachers, nurses, librarians) are aware of services and trained to connect young people to services. Efforts should seek to ensure every young person is aware of available supports and services in their community.
9. Provide ongoing training and education for all staff on anti-oppression, cultural competency, trauma-informed care, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, and positive youth development approaches.
10. Utilize equity and diversity-seeking hiring policies within all youth-serving agencies, with a particular focus on hiring staff and management from diverse cultural backgrounds.
11. Ensure that all programs, services, supports, and interventions meet the needs of diverse youth experiencing homelessness, including Indigenous youth, racialized youth, newcomer youth, and youth who identify as LGBTQ2S+.
12. Foster meaningful youth engagement in all policy development, planning, and implementation processes within the youth homelessness sector. Support all youth-serving agencies and organizations to establish Youth Advisory Boards. Ensure the provision of necessary supports to youth (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.

# COMMUNITIES

1. Develop and implement a community-level strategy or plan to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness with ambitious targets, supported by a targeted investment. This Strategy should:
  - a) Align with or reinforce the need for provincial/territorial strategies that explicitly reference the human rights of youth experiencing homelessness.
  - b) Focus on clear and measurable outcomes, milestones, and criteria.
  - c) Adopt the core principles of Housing First for Youth (Gaetz, 2017) as the guiding philosophy of a community-led strategy. These principles should guide communities of all sizes.
  - d) Implement an independent review process to assess progress towards ending youth homelessness.
  - e) Implement policies and practices that proactively address the unique needs of particular populations deemed to be at greater risk of homelessness, including Indigenous youth, racialized youth, newcomer youth, and youth who identify as LGBTQ2S+.
  - f) Implement a focused prevention strategy to support young people who are under 16 and at risk of homelessness, supported by targeted investments.
  - g) Work with Indigenous communities to develop and implement a focused homelessness prevention strategy for Indigenous youth and their families, supported by targeted investments. Meaningfully involve young people with lived experience in the creation and monitoring of this strategy or plan, compensating them for their work.
  - h) Act as a “living, breathing document” that is re-visited and revised as community learning emerges from efforts to implement strategies therein.
  
2. Prioritize and support systems integration (where appropriate) in all efforts to proactively address the needs of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. As a component of these integrated efforts, communities should:
  - a) Engage provincial/territorial government systems (Child Welfare, Health, Education, Justice, and Income Supports) to ensure they understand and commit to their roles and responsibilities in addressing youth homelessness. These systems should adopt a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to supporting youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.
  - b) Develop and employ a standardized assessment tool that can be used across systems to assist in determining homelessness risk for youth.
  - c) Promote strategic partnerships between youth-serving organizations and agencies, schools, health care providers, child protection services, law enforcement, and other institutions that interact with young people.
  - d) Prioritize rapid youth homelessness diversion and re-housing efforts.

3. Foster meaningful youth engagement in the development of community policies and responses that affect youth at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness. Ensure the provision of necessary supports (reimbursement, compensation, accessibility, etc.) at all events, forums, and discussion groups.
  
4. In reflecting on practice and programmatic responses to youth homelessness as articulated in the community-level strategy, community organizations should ensure prevention-based activities exist within the continuum of supports provided to youth. To this end, all communities should:
  - a) Provide prevention and place-based services and supports for young people between the ages of 13-24.
  - b) Follow the definition of prevention articulated in A New Direction – A Framework for Homelessness Prevention, which stresses that programs and interventions that purport to prevent youth homelessness must be housing led.
  - c) Retool emergency and crisis services to support shelter diversion and other place-based supports at the first point of contact.
  - d) Ensure that all young people who come in to contact with homelessness services, in either the adult or youth systems, are provided with interventions to bolster family and natural supports.
  - e) Support youth to achieve outcomes beyond housing stability, including health and well-being, engagement with education and/or employment, attainment of life skills, meaningful social inclusion, connection to culture, and the building of natural and family supports.

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