

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# CHILD WELFARE AND YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

*A Proposal for Action*

NAOMI NICHOLS, KAITLIN SCHWAN, STEPHEN GAETZ  
MELANIE REDMAN, DAVID FRENCH, SEAN KIDD, BILL O'GRADY

© 2017 Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press



This research paper is protected under a Creative Commons license that allows you to share, copy, distribute, and transmit the work for non-commercial purposes, provided you attribute it to the original source.

## HOW TO CITE THIS DOCUMENT:

Nichols, N., Schwan, K., Gaetz, S., Redman, M., French, D., Kidd, S., O'Grady, B. (2017). *Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action - Executive Summary*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank A Way Home Canada, the Graham Boeckh Foundation, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, and the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness, whose insights and feedback enormously strengthened this brief and its recommendations.

Design by Dylan Ostetto, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness



This executive summary is based on *Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*, a research study made possible through the generous support of the Home Depot Canada Foundation.



# Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada - Executive Summary

With the release of [Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey](#) (2016), we now have robust national data on youth homelessness for the first time in Canada. The research findings on the relationship between youth homelessness and child welfare involvement are unsettling:

- **57.8%** of youth experiencing homelessness reported some type of involvement with child protection services over their lifetime.
- **63.1%** of youth who are homeless report experiencing childhood trauma, abuse, and/or neglect - a key cause of involvement with child welfare.
- **73.3%** of youth who became homeless before the age of 16 reported involvement with child protection services.
- Compared to the general public (Statistics Canada, 2011), youth experiencing homelessness are **193** times more likely to have been involved with the child welfare system than the general public.
- **31.5%** of youth who are homeless report their first contact with the welfare system at the age of 6, with **53%** reporting continued involvement beyond the age of 16.
- Indigenous youth make up **7%** of the total population of young Canadians, yet make up half of individuals involved in child protection services (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Importantly, *Without a Home* also found that youth facing structural and systemic disadvantage (e.g., poverty, racism, homophobia) are more likely to experience both child welfare involvement and homelessness. For example, data indicates that LGBTQ2S, transgender, and gender non-binary youth are more likely to have had child welfare involvement than cisgender and straight homeless youth.

*“The need to provide young people with opportunities to succeed as emerging adults remains a challenge to the Child Welfare system. While society has embraced families to support their offspring well into the child’s twenties and beyond, youth dependent on the guardianship of the province have had to accept something far less.”*

- The Children’s Advocate 1998-99 Annual Report, p.17

# Child Welfare & Youth Homelessness in Canada: Structural Factors & System Failures

Structural and systemic failures are key drivers of both youth homelessness and child welfare involvement.

These failures include broader societal issues (e.g., poverty, discrimination) and poor coordination across systems that increase the likelihood that someone will become homeless. This policy brief explores four key areas of concern with respect to child welfare involvement and youth homelessness:

- a) Housing instability in care**, including being removed from family home at an early age and living in foster care and/or group home setting.
- b) Difficult transitions from child welfare services** (e.g., aging out of care, lack of supports, leaving care because of “bad experiences”) are linked to subsequent experiences of homelessness. Difficult transitions are also correlated with higher rates of unemployment, lack of educational engagement and achievement, involvement in corrections, and experiences of poverty.
- c) Youth with early experiences of homelessness**, especially before the age of 16, are more likely to report involvement with child protection services (73% vs. 57.8%). This suggests that preventing homelessness among young people who are under 16 and have child welfare involvement should be a policy priority.
- d) Inequity** such as structural forms of disadvantage and marginalization (e.g., colonialism, racism, poverty, homophobia, transphobia) contribute to the overrepresentation of children and families of particular races, ethnicities, implementation of Jordan's Principle to reduce service gaps, delays, and denial of support for Indigenous children and youth.

## Why now?

- Many provinces across Canada have recently demonstrated positive policy shifts towards ensuring housing safety and stability for youth with involvement in the child welfare system.
- There is an ongoing national movement towards preventing youth homelessness in Canada, including through the provision of supports for youth who are transitioning from care.
- Conversations about how to address homelessness have been moving away from an emergency crisis response to investing in prevention and helping people rapidly exit homelessness.
- Child protection legislation and practice have not kept pace with current social and economic changes that make it much more difficult for young people to live independently in their teens and early twenties.
- For every \$1 spent on investment for the implementation of best practices, such as early intervention, there is a \$5.60 “return on investment”.
- 30% of youth view their transition from care as directly impacting their current situation of homelessness. Significantly, 57.4% of youth who ‘aged out’ of care would have appreciated continued support. This suggests that more youth than not would be receptive to continued, ongoing supports if made available.

To leverage this momentum, all orders of government in Canada must consider the policies, programs, interventions, and investments in this brief that can contribute to more successful transitions from care for young people.

# Recommendations

## GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

- a) Working with provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments, the Government of Canada should commit to making Canada a world leader in helping young people to successfully transition from care in a way that is safe, planned, and supported.*
- b) In renewing its homelessness strategy, the Government of Canada should ensure that youth and homelessness prevention are prioritized, where successful transitions from care become an important focus.*
- c) The Government of Canada should play a leadership role in convening, sharing, and showcasing best practices in policy and service provision in, and transitioning from, care.*
- d) The Government of Canada should provide additional investments to support Indigenous-led reforms of child protection.*

## PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENTS

- a) Implement an After Care Guarantee. This entails that when young people are taken into care, the state commits to providing ongoing support (as needed) until a young person reaches the age of 25.*
- b) Ensure young people in the child welfare system experience safe, appropriate, and stable housing.*
- c) Implement a focused prevention strategy to support young people who are under 16 and at risk of homelessness.*
- d) Implement a focused strategy to support young people for whom the systems for youth currently serve least well, including: Indigenous youth, LGBTQ2S youth, gender non-binary youth, and racialized youth.*
- e) Implement harm reduction models that focus on reducing the risks or harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive or other high-risk behaviours for the individual.*

## CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES AND WORKERS

- a) Implement strengths-based policy and practice for young people currently in care to build their resilience, given that this leads to more successful transitions from care.*
- b) Provide ongoing and meaningful training and supports for case workers to meet the needs of adolescents and young adults in care.*
- c) Support young people to access necessary and appropriate mental health and addictions supports, and ensure that those transitioning from care also are able to transition to adult systems.*
- d) Ensure that case workers have appropriate caseloads to carry out this important work.*
- e) Provide an accountability framework so young people in care, as well as those transitioning from care, have the opportunity to provide ongoing feedback.*
- f) Employ a standardized assessment tool to assist in determining homelessness/flight risk.*