Education access for young women experiencing homelessness

What you need to know
Young women who are experiencing homelessness are eager to re-engage with school. This is most likely to occur when there are a range of supports available to them by agencies and when school staff provides long-term support. Efforts to increase access to education for girls who have lived on the street must take into account the need for learning approaches that validate their life experience.

What is this research about?
When schools and other social institutions (such as child welfare, justice, and health care services) fail to provide supports, homeless young women are less likely to access education. Young women who experience homelessness, or who have no fixed address, have additional barriers to education. Social, economic and political factors play a part in their “choice” to leave school. Young women leave school as a result of the lack of supports, including: safe housing, counselling services, and child care. Without safe and stable housing, young women are more likely to have been victims of personal and systemic violence, sexual assault, and sexual exploitation and/or rape. Many have also had negative experiences with child welfare and the criminal justice system.

KEYWORDS
youth homelessness, criminalization, education access, girls, poverty, social exclusion, violence, youth development

ARTICLE SOURCE

Visit www.homelesshub.ca for more information
What did the researchers do?

The goal of the research was to document how young women who are homeless or living on the street describe their experiences within education. The study took place in Halifax, Saskatoon and Vancouver. It included 118 young women between the ages of 12 and 24 years old. Data was gathered through 23 focus groups and 14 individual interviews. Out of this group, 77 self-identified as First Nations, 8 as African Canadian and 1 as Mexican.

What did the researchers find?

The researcher highlighted a few key themes based on the research:

- A lack of safe housing made it difficult to: attend school, travel to school, pay school fees and related costs, and maintain hygiene.
- Sexism and sexual harassment were major barriers to completing school. Young women reported sexual harassment by male staff and teachers.
- Many young women reported not fitting in at school due to their experiences with violence and living on the street. This was accompanied by feelings that the school did not care about them. Many found it hard to connect with students, principals or support staff within schools who could not understand their lived realities.
- There is a lack of research on the different experience of aboriginal girls who are homeless.
- Within the school systems, there is a presence of discrimination based on identity including; gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality.
- Community groups and schools must share resources to reduce barriers. This means focusing on housing, racism, sexism, violence, homophobia and poverty.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Jaskiran Dhillon is an Assistant Professor of Education Studies and Anthropology at The New School University in New York City. Her research interests are anthropology of the state, international education development, minority rights, indigenous studies, ethnographic methods, and youth development.