



# Housing Stabilization For Youth

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REPORT 5/6

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This report also 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](#). This report also builds upon the evidence reviewed in [Youth Homelessness Prevention: An International Review of Evidence](#). The recommendations in this report build upon those within several policy briefs and reports published by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada. We wish to thank the authors of these documents for their insights, and hope this report will amplify the impact of their work.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is time for a new approach to youth homelessness - one that is proactive, not reactive.

*Our emergency-focused response has meant that we largely respond only after a young person is on the streets. As a consequence, young people experience profound avoidable suffering that shapes the rest of their lives. In [consultations across the country](#), young people were resolute: we are waiting too long to intervene when a young person is at risk of or experiencing homelessness.*

This report is one of a six-part series on youth homelessness prevention, drawing from [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#) (Gaetz et al., 2018). *The Roadmap* is designed to support a paradigm shift to prevention by providing a clear definition of youth homelessness prevention, offering a framework and common language for prevention policy and practice, reviewing the evidence for prevention, and highlighting practice examples from around the world. Each report in the series explores one element of youth homelessness prevention, providing a framework for targeted action and change in that area.

In this report we tackle the critical issue of **housing stabilization for youth who have exited homelessness** – a key component of any comprehensive approach to youth homelessness

prevention. Housing stabilization for youth should include a focus on well-being embedded within each form of housing stabilization:

- 1) Housing Supports
- 2) Health & Well-being
- 3) Access to Income & Education
- 4) Complementary Supports
- 5) Social Inclusion

This report also considers housing stabilization for Indigenous youth, moving beyond mainstream/ colonial understandings of homelessness to include cultural connection, opportunities for healing, and (re)connection with community.

***The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness provides a comprehensive framework for youth homelessness prevention, and should be read in full to best understand how youth homelessness prevention can be implemented in Canada. The Roadmap also provides detailed recommendations for embedding prevention in policy and practice***

## Why Prevention?

Prevention is generally accepted as more effective and desirable than waiting for complex problems to spiral out of control before intervening. Unfortunately, in North America the notion of preventing the problem of homelessness is not well understood and has not yet gained traction in policy, practice, or investment. For many years, crisis responses to homelessness have been relied upon to meet the immediate survival needs of young people who experience homelessness through emergency shelters, day programs, and law enforcement. ***This reliance on crisis responses, while well-meaning, has not produced the outcomes we want.*** There has been no demonstrable decrease in the number of young people that end up on the street, and young people who are homeless continue to suffer tremendously, experiencing violence, nutritional vulnerability, mental health crises, isolation, and discrimination. The pan-Canadian [Without a Home](#) study (Gaetz et al., 2016) brought to light an ongoing crisis, revealing that among youth experiencing homelessness:

- 40.1% were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness;
- 76% had multiple experiences of homelessness, with 37% of these youth reporting more than five experiences of homelessness;
- 85.4% were experiencing a mental health crisis, with 42% reporting at least one suicide attempt;
- 38% of young women reported a sexual assault in the previous 12 months;
- 57.8% had involvement with child welfare involvement. Compared to national data (Statistics Canada, 2011), youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely to have had involvement with child welfare (see also Nichols et al., 2017);
- 63.1% had experienced childhood trauma and abuse;
- 51% were not currently involved in either education, employment, or training; and
- Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, and LGBTQ2S+ youth are overrepresented in homeless youth populations across Canada.

## A number of important conclusions can be drawn from these numbers:

**First**, we are waiting far too long to intervene when young people are at risk of homelessness, or experiencing homelessness.

**Second**, experiencing homelessness for any length of time can have a devastating impact on health, safety, mental health and well-being of young people.

**Third**, some young people – particularly Indigenous youth, LGBTQ2S+ youth, newcomer youth, and young women - experience the additional burden of ongoing discrimination and bias-based violence and exclusion.

**Fourth**, emergency responses on their own do not prevent homelessness, or necessarily help youth exit homelessness rapidly. Relying on such a crisis-based approach does not offer an effective or adequate solution to the problem of youth homelessness, and we therefore cannot and should not expect young people to “bootstrap” themselves out of homelessness.

**Fifth**, our public systems are failing to prevent young people from entering homelessness. It is clear that we are missing many opportunities to prevent youth homelessness within public systems.

**Finally**, people with lived experience of youth homelessness strongly profess the need to shift from the crisis response to a focus on prevention and sustainable exits from homelessness. In a recent national consultation conducted by the COH and AWHC, youth stated that “by building a response that is primarily reactive, we not only condemn youth to hardship and trauma, we actually ensure it” (Schwan et al., 2018a, p. 122).

***The time has come to shift to a proactive, rather than reactive, response to the problem of youth homelessness.***

## Defining Youth Homelessness Prevention

Despite broad political and community-based interest in youth homelessness prevention, there has been lack of clarity about what it entails. We offer the following definition of youth homelessness prevention:

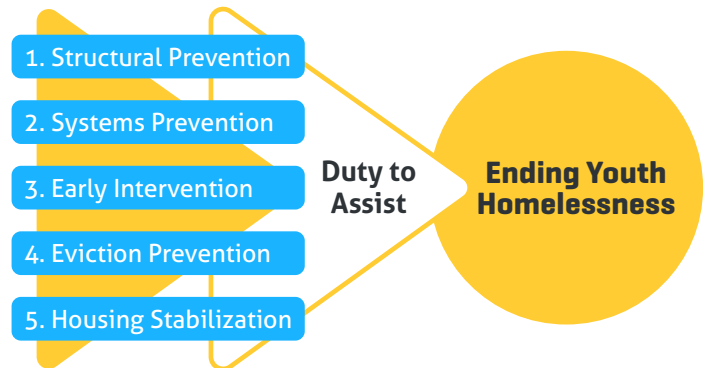
**Youth homelessness prevention** refers to policies, practices, and interventions that either (1) reduce the likelihood that a young person will experience homelessness, or (2) provide youth experiencing homelessness with the necessary supports to stabilize their housing, improve their wellbeing, connect with community, and avoid re-entry into homelessness. Youth homelessness prevention thus necessitates the immediate provision of housing and supports for youth experiencing homelessness, or the immediate protection of housing, with supports, for youth at risk of homelessness. Youth homelessness prevention must be applied using a rights-based approach and address the unique needs of developing adolescents and young adults.

This definition is adapted from Gaetz and Dej's (2017) broader [definition of homelessness prevention](#), drawing into focus policies and practices that are responsive to the distinct challenges that young people face. In implementing youth homelessness prevention, governments and communities should seek out evidence-based and promising interventions and policies that are both developmentally and individually tailored.

## A Typology of Youth Homelessness Prevention

To conceptualize types of homelessness prevention for youth, [The Roadmap for Youth Homelessness Prevention](#) builds on the typology within [A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention](#).

This typology articulates a range of preventative activities that aim to stabilize housing, improve health and wellbeing, promote social inclusion, and contribute to better long-term outcomes for youth and their families.



## Homelessness Prevention Typology

### 1) Structural Prevention

Legislation, policy, and investment to address risks of homelessness and increase social equality. Examples include: legislating housing as a human right, adhering to the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action](#), poverty reduction strategies, and income supports.

### 2) Systems Prevention

Breaking barriers and enhancing access to services, supports, & benefits. This includes transition supports for those leaving public institutions, such as correctional facilities, hospitals, and child protection systems.

### 3) Early Intervention

Strategies designed to act early and address the risk of homelessness, as well as provide crisis intervention to those who have recently

experienced homelessness. Examples include: effective outreach, coordinated intake and assessment, client-centered case management, and shelter diversion.

### 4) Eviction Prevention

A type of early intervention, programs designed to keep people stably housed and help them avoid eviction. Examples include: landlord/tenant mediation, rental assistance, emergency financial assistance, and legal advice and representation.

### 5) Housing Stabilization

Supporting people who have experienced homelessness to find and maintain housing. This includes Housing First and supports to enhance health and well-being, education and employment, and social inclusion.



In consideration of the needs of young people, the *Roadmap* adds an additional legislative strategy: **Duty to Assist**. Duty to Assist means that there is a *legal duty* to ensure that young people are provided with information, advice, and housing-led supports to avoid an experience of homelessness, or to make that experience as brief as possible. Duty to Assist is a rights-based approach to youth homelessness.

These six elements work in concert to prevent youth homelessness. These approaches span upstream efforts focused on structural prevention, to systems approaches that improve experiences in public institutions, to early interventions and

housing stabilization efforts that reduce the risk of homelessness and prevent young people from cycling back into homelessness.

To bring prevention to life, each sector, order of government, community, practitioner, and caring individual must make the commitment to wholeheartedly and relentlessly pursue this new vision for young people in Canada, aligning their collective strengths, knowledge, and resources to move from vision to reality. For a comprehensive youth homelessness prevention framework, see [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#).

## Who is Responsible for Youth Homelessness Prevention?

It is critical to delineate responsibility when articulating the range of programs, policies, and approaches that can support the prevention of youth homelessness. We must clarify when the homelessness sector should play a leading role, and when other institutions and orders of government carry the main responsibility. Youth homelessness prevention cannot solely rely on the homelessness system's funding and services. Rather, cross-systems and whole government approaches are required to achieve lasting change for young people.

Young people across the country articulated that youth homelessness prevention requires changes in multiple public systems (Schwan et al., 2018a), including housing, criminal justice, child welfare, healthcare, and education. Prevention work requires improved collaboration and coordination between and within ministries, departments, and communities, along with investment, policy development and alignment, and leadership from all orders of government.

Most importantly, this shift requires that we redefine who is viewed as responsible for youth homelessness prevention. It is time to collaborate with the systems and sectors that youth are engaged with *prior* to becoming homeless, leveraging each system interaction to improve a young person's housing stability, wellness, and other positive outcomes. To do so, we must implement structures that support mutual engagement in—and accountability to—one another's work and the changes we all want to see: better outcomes for youth.

## A Human-Rights Approach to Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness prevention work must be grounded in the fundamental human rights of young people in Canada. Canada is a signatory to a number of international human rights agreements that define rights relevant to homeless youth, including the following rights:

- Right to adequate standard of living
- Right to adequate housing
- Right to adequate food
- Right to work
- Right to health
- Right to education
- Right to personal security & privacy
- Right of equal access to justice
- Right to assembly
- Right to freedom of expression
- Right to life

(Canada Without Poverty & A Way Home Canada, 2016)

That youth homelessness exists in Canada, and that we allow young people to remain trapped in homelessness, represents a *denial* of basic human rights. As a human rights violation, youth homelessness must be remedied. Practically, this means that policies, laws, and strategies aimed at youth homelessness prevention must be grounded in human rights at all stages of development, implementation, and evaluation.

## Housing Stabilization

### *for Youth Who Have Exited Homelessness*



*Housing stabilization is central in any effort to help someone exit homelessness permanently, and is often an important goal in policy, service delivery, and practice. In North America, it is often framed as the key – and in many cases only – performance indicator that defines the outcome of strategies to end homelessness.*

Despite being a core measure of how we assess 'successful exits' from homelessness, "the concept of housing stability remains poorly defined and conceptualized, and to date there are no standard measures" (Frederick et al., 2014, p. 965).

Unfortunately, we make a number of untested assumptions about the outcomes for young people who exit homelessness and obtain housing, especially when long-term trajectories are not tracked. For instance, there is little evidence or understanding of what happens when young people exit homelessness and do not come in contact with the local service system again within the first year after being housed. Did they return home to family? Have they been drawn into criminal activities, or been victims of crimes, including human trafficking? Have they moved? Are they avoiding the system because it was not helpful? Are they still alive?

These unanswered questions suggest that the binary 'housed/not housed' is an insufficient indicator of success in addressing youth homelessness. When we aggregate data with 'housed/not housed' as the key performance indicator at the community level, can we really make the claim that progress is being made to end homelessness or achieve 'functional zero'?

In addition to ensuring young people exit homelessness quickly and do not cycle back into homelessness, communities must also provide the resources and supports to ensure improved long-term, positive outcomes in the areas of health and well-being, education and employment, life skills, and social inclusion. This is the work of housing stabilization, and is one of six elements of prevention outlined in [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#).

## Defining Housing Stabilization

A form of tertiary prevention, housing stabilization involves assisting young people who have already experienced homelessness and housing precarity to exit that situation as quickly as possible, with the necessary supports in place to ensure they do not cycle back into homelessness again. In addition to assisting youth to achieve housing stability, housing stabilization seeks to improve outcomes in other areas of young people's lives, including health, well-being, social inclusion, educational achievement, and employment. Housing stabilization is also a goal of early intervention.

## Why Does Housing Stabilization Matter?

While many young people who experience homelessness are able to resolve the situation and return to housing (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002; Milburn et al., 2009), little is known about the long-term housing trajectories of these youth (Braciszewski et al., 2016; Frederick et al., 2014; Karabanow, 2004; 2010). Conversely, for young people who experience prolonged exposure to homelessness, there is considerable evidence attesting to the profound negative consequences for health, safety, and well-being (Zeger et al., 2008; Kulick et al., 2011; Boivan et al., 2005; Roy et al., 2004; Kidd & Kral, 2002; McKay, 2009; Kirst & Erickson, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2010). So what happens to these youth when they are able to exit homelessness into housing?

**The results of the limited research that has been done on youths' housing trajectories is compelling, but not in a positive way.**

Prolonged experience of homelessness may continue to undermine housing stability and wellness even if young people exit homelessness, as many will continue to grapple with trauma and other mental health challenges, addictions, and extreme poverty.

**Simply being housed is not a positive indicator of well-being, nor a strong predictor of healthy living, safety, labour force participation, or social inclusion.**

Several Canadian studies point to this conclusion. Kozloff et al. (2016), in an analysis of data from the *At Home/Chez Soi* study, found that for young adults aged 18-24 receiving the Pathways model of Housing First, housing outcomes were similar to the adult cohort but results for quality of life indicators (e.g., social integration, engagement in employment) were not so positive. A study in Toronto and Halifax by Kidd, Karabanow, and colleagues followed 51 young people for 12 months as they transitioned from homelessness (Kidd et al., 2016; Karabanow et al., 2018). The study showed that while young people demonstrated high levels of commitment, they also faced significant structural barriers resulting in social isolation, challenges in maintaining housing stability, and finding employment. There was great variability in mental health and quality of life, and after a year many experienced a significant decline in hope.

Karabanow (2008), in a qualitative study involving interviews with 128 young people and 50 service providers in six Canadian cities, found that for most youth, the pathway off the streets was a non-linear process that presented many challenges. Karabanow and colleagues (2010) identified that the more embedded in street life one is, and the stronger bonds one has with street-involved peers, the more likely a young person's ability and desire to exit street life and integrate into mainstream society is undermined. Thulien et al. (2017) in Toronto describes in detail the factors that undermine housing stability and well-being, including the lack of affordable housing, limited social capital, inadequate education, and limited labour force participation. This led to poverty-level income, an inability to formulate long range plans, ongoing feelings of *outsiderness*, and the constant fear of becoming homeless again.

International research produces similar results. Mayock and colleagues (2008; 2010; 2011; 2013; 2014) have conducted considerable research on transitions in Dublin, Ireland, including a qualitative study tracking the housing trajectories of 40 young people over six years. While almost all young people who exited homelessness returned to education or vocational training, most young people identified significant challenges including financial hardship and difficulty establishing positive social relationships. Few were able to maintain independent housing, with most either moving back home or into transitional housing. It should be noted that family support was a positive predictive factor for maintaining independent living. Mayock and colleagues also highlight the importance of supporting rapid exits from homelessness, finding that "Those young people who 'got out' early were likely to 'stay out', even if a number did return to homelessness temporarily for a period" (Mayock & Corr, 2013, p. 65).

The factors that predict housing stability and well-being are variable. An Australian study by Milburn et al. (2009) using the [Risk Amplification and Abatement Model](#) (RAAM) found that ongoing contact with negative socialising agents undermines housing stability, while contact with more positive social relations produced a more stabilizing outcome. Similar to Mayock, school engagement and support from family, particularly maternal support, were important factors enhancing housing stability.

**Karabanow (2008; 2010) identified that successful exits from the streets involved much more than pragmatic factors such as finding housing as well as changing routines and relationships, but also involved important emotional and spiritual shifts including a move away from the identity of being a homeless youth.**

Roy et al. (2011), in a large-scale quantitative study in Montreal (n=365), indicated that youth who had completed high school, were engaged in employment, and who had sought mental health support were 40 to 50% more likely to achieve stability than other study participants. The authors suggest that efforts to enhance housing stabilization and prevent chronic homelessness, “should not only target individual impairments but also build on services that foster social connections among youth” (Roy et al., 2016, p. 7). Karabanow (2008; 2010) identified that successful exits from the streets involved much more than pragmatic factors, such as finding housing as well as changing routines and relationships, but also involved important emotional and spiritual shifts, including a move away from the identity of being a ‘homeless youth’. A study in Ohio by Slesznick et al. (2007) identified that the more connections participants had at baseline with mainstream social systems including healthcare, education, and medical care, the fewer days they spent homeless.

Finally, we need to consider how the youthful age of many who experience homelessness may impact on housing stability. Stabilising housing and living conditions can be extremely difficult for youth once they exit homelessness, in part because of the tumultuous developmental age and stage they are at in the life course (Gaetz et al., 2013; Kidd et al., 2016). Many of these youth face the responsibilities of independence *before* they have accumulated the necessary skills, experiences, and psychosocial resources to undertake this transition (Crane et al., 2014; Hagan & McCarthy, 2005). Indeed, youth experiencing homelessness often lack the resources and social supports needed to build the skills necessary for independent living (Milburn et al., 2009; Mayock, Corr, & O’Sullivan, 2011; Tevendale, Comulada, & Lightfoot, 2011). Housing stabilization interventions are, therefore, critical to help youth transition off the streets and prevent re-entry into homelessness.

**Many of these youth face the responsibilities of independence before they have accumulated the necessary skills, experiences, and psychosocial resources to undertake this transition.**

## Supporting Housing Stability Through A Focus On Well-Being

The review of research suggests that to achieve housing stabilization for youth and young adults who have experienced or are at risk of homelessness, it is necessary to consider a broader range of outcomes beyond housing status, which focus more on well-being, building assets, strengthening resilience, and enhancing social inclusion. These outcomes should guide the models of service delivery and supports.

There are existing models of accommodation and support intended to enhance life skills, promote healing, help build assets, and improve quality of life. Some incorporate housing as part of the model of support, such as transitional housing program the Foyer (Gaetz et al., 2012). Another example is the [Housing First for Youth](#) program model developed by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada (Gaetz, 2014a, b; 2017). This adaptation of Housing First to meet the needs of developing adolescents and young adults is currently undergoing rigorous evaluation in three countries, with three demonstration sites in Canada.

Other interventions such as the Housing Outreach Program - Collaboration (HOP-C) are designed to complement and stabilize a broad array of housing arrangements through youth-focussed and co-designed transitional case management, mental health, and peer support intervention (Kidd et al., 2016; Karabanow et al., 2018). HOP-C provides seamless and integrated transitional case management, mental health intervention, and peer support – all building out from a dynamic process of youth engagement. While HOP-C is showing promising results, additional research in smaller community contexts centres will enhance our knowledge of its application in different settings.

**The level and kinds of support that are needed to stabilize housing will vary, depending on identified needs as well as the desires of the young person. Many youth will require a range of supports and case management to retain their housing, while others will have minimal need for additional supports beyond help accessing housing.**

Youth choice and self-determination are essential for determining the length and intensity of services (Crane et al., 2014), and evidence suggests that supports should be sustained or accessible well after youth access housing. Therapeutic relationships between young people and trusted professionals are critical to achieving housing stability (Kidd et al., 2014).



Determining the needs of young people is therefore a priority. Effective and strengths-based assessment tools such as the Youth Assessment Prioritization (YAP) Tool, which includes both a “screener” and a more extensive assessment tool, can be used for this purpose. Unlike many other assessment tools, the YAP tool is strengths-based, evidence informed, and relies on the knowledge of both the young person and the worker to make an assessment. The YAP tool has been field tested in Canada and is currently being validated by the University of Ottawa.

Coordinated supports for youth must also be considered, including supports for those in under-resourced rural and remote areas where services may be difficult to access (Farrin, Dollard, & Cheers, 2005; Skott-Myhre, Raby, & Nikolaou, 2008). Further, it is important that young people are able to reconnect with services they previously withdrew from, without facing consequences (Vitopoulos et al., 2017). This may be critical given evidence that a young person’s sense of personal control in service delivery directly impacts housing stability (Slesnick et al., 2017).

## Key Forms of Housing Stabilization

A comprehensive framework identifying the range and kinds of supports that can contribute to housing stabilization has been described as part of the [Housing First for Youth](#) (HF4Y) program model (Gaetz, 2014; 2017). [THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide](#) (Gaetz, 2017) outlines a broader range of supports than is typically associated with Housing First targeting adults, because it is designed to address the needs of developing adolescents and young adults. In addition, a key goal of HF4Y is not simply to help young people become independently housed, but to be supported through a successful transition into adulthood, independence, and well-being. This has implications for service delivery program costs, case management approach, caseloads, and the length of time a young person should be supported. The outcome of this approach is currently being evaluated as part of the *Making the Shift* project, using methodologies similar to those that were employed as part of the *At Home/Chez Soi* project.

**FIGURE 1: AREAS OF SUPPORTS TO ENHANCE HOUSING STABILIZATION (HOUSING FIRST FOR YOUTH)**



Figure 5 summarizes the range of supports that enhance housing stabilization, based on the [Housing First for Youth Framework](#). Below is a more in-depth examination of this framework of supports.



## 1) Housing Supports

While many young people who have experienced homelessness manage to find housing on their own, including returning to live with family members, others will need more intensive and ongoing housing support. This support may be short term and crisis-based, or for some youth, ongoing and possibly permanent.

In some cases, housing supports are provided by a separate housing worker, but can also be the responsibility of a case worker. Incorporating housing supports into casework can be a route to deepening the therapeutic relationship and helping youth who may not be easily engaged to connect with other kinds of supports.

### The range of housing supports include:

- 1) **Help in obtaining housing** – Support searching for and obtaining housing that is safe, affordable, and appropriate, with a spectrum of housing options offered in order to best meet the needs of diverse young people.
- 2) **Housing retention** – Helping young people learn how to take care of and maintain housing, pay rent on time, develop good relations with landlords and neighbours, or deal with friends and roommates.
- 3) **Rent supplements** – Many young people will lack the earning power to pay market rent, and may need rent supplements, which should be geared toward income to ensure that youth pay no more than 30% of their income on rent.
- 4) **Access to start-up home furnishings and appliances** – Ensuring that youth have adequate furnishings to make their place of living a functioning home.
- 5) **Support when things go wrong** – A “zero discharge into homelessness” philosophy, so that housing stability and crisis management, rather than arbitrary time limits, are the focus of intervention.
- 6) **Evictions prevention support** – Legal, professional, and informational assistance to prevent housing loss due to eviction.
- 7) **Aftercare** – Continued contact with support workers that can quickly respond if problems arise.

The most significant success factor in housing stabilisation interventions, and the first step of support, is access to safe, affordable, appropriate housing (Kidd et al., 2014). A lack of housing options promotes young people’s cycling through contact with systems such as shelter, justice, and substance use treatment (Vitopoulos et al., 2017). Schwan et al., (2018b) in their [review of evidence for youth homelessness prevention](#), remarked that in their consultation with international homelessness experts, a resounding theme was that time-limited supports, often associated with transitional housing programs, become a barrier to housing stabilization. They also emphasized “the need to ensure youth have choice and voice in addressing their housing needs” (Schwan et al., 2018, p. 48).

## 2) Supports for Health and Well-Being

The [core principles of Housing First for Youth](#) clarify the kinds of health and well-being supports that should be provided to by young people. Developing adolescents and young adults have age-specific needs, and the experience of homelessness may have had a profoundly negative impact on well-being. Housing stabilization requires that attention be paid to youths' physical and mental health needs, and more generally to their well-being. Housing stabilization case management should incorporate a recovery-orientation based on trauma-informed care. Interventions should be person-centred, and strengths-based, taking into account the developmental needs of young people, as well as their assets within a positive youth development context. Support services should respond to the diverse needs identified by each individual (Kidd et al., 2014). The range of supports identified here are considered in terms of how they enhance well-being, mitigate the effects of mental health and addictions challenges, improve quality of life and foster self-sufficiency.

### Key areas of support:

- 1) Access to health care** – Obtaining good primary care is important for a population that may not have had access to it in the past, particularly for individuals with ongoing health challenges and disabilities (Kulick et al., 2011). Access to diagnostic testing is also important, as many individuals may have disabilities or conditions for which they can receive additional supports (Macdonald, 2015).
- 2) Mental health supports** – A large percentage of young people who experience homelessness also endure considerable mental health challenges (Kidd, 2013; Kidd et al., 2018; Gaetz et al., 2016). Research by Kidd et al. (2016) shows that even a year post-homelessness, many young people still have poor mental health and quality of life - putting at them risk for re-entry into homelessness. Such findings demonstrate the need for ongoing health and well-being supports once young people are stably housed, including systems navigation strategies to help youth to quickly access supports when things go wrong. Others youth may suffer from undiagnosed developmental delays, brain injury, or other disabling conditions. As part of a system of care, such individuals should be supported to access assessments and suitable interventions, if required.
- 3) Trauma-informed care** – Many people who become homeless often have experienced trauma either prior to becoming homeless or once they are on the streets. It is, therefore, essential that those providing supports practice trauma-informed care, in which there is acknowledgement of traumatic experiences, and an understanding that the experience of trauma can be paralyzing, can affect behavior and decision-making, and can lead to addictions (Kirst et al., 2016; Elliott et al., 2005; Fallo & Harris 2005).

- 4) Harm reduction support** – Some young people who have experienced homelessness will need ongoing support to deal with substance use problems and addictions. Harm reduction is a humane, client-centred and evidence-based approach to working with people with addictions, and such supports should help people retain their housing; reduce the risk of harms to themselves, people close to them, and the community; and help them become more engaged with education, training, employment, and other meaningful activities (Kirst et al., 2011; 2013; Gaetz, 2015). Harm reduction and substance use supports as part of housing stabilization interventions have been found to stabilize housing and improve mental health (Kreindler & Coodin, 2010). Powell et al. (2016) also found evidence for the efficacy of these approaches to housing stabilization for LGBTQ2S+ identifying young people.
- 5) Enhancing personal safety** – Many youth experience physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse prior to being homeless. Once on the streets, they are exponentially more likely to be victims of crime (Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010). Two recent studies of youth homelessness in ten cities identified that almost one fifth were victims of human trafficking (mostly sex trafficking) (Murphy, 2017). When young people leave the streets, they may continue to be victims of criminal exploitation, including [home takeovers](#). Enhancing the personal safety of young people by ensuring that they have access to housing that is safe, are protected from exploitation, and build resilience and strategies to avoid such exploitation, is a key component of wellness supports.
- 6) Food security** – For young people, a good diet is important for proper growth and development. Without enough food or the right kinds of food, our health is compromised and our ability to get things done is undermined. The surest way to guarantee food security is to ensure young people have an adequate source of income (Tarasuk et al., 2009; 2013).
- 7) Promoting healthy sexuality** – Sexual health is a central feature of physical, emotional, and social health and well-being that influences individuals of all ages. Unfortunately, many young people with lived experience of homelessness have been exposed to physical and sexual abuse at a young age. Furthermore, young people who remain homeless for extended periods of time are exposed to early sexual activity, exploitation, including pressure to exchange sex for food, shelter, money, or companionship, and a greater risk of sexual assault (Milburn et al., 2009; Saewyc et al., 2013; Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz et al., 2010). Finally, youth who self-identify as LGBTQ2S+ may face additional challenges in their transition to adulthood. It is important that services are sensitive to the diverse sexualities and gender expressions of youth by providing safe, welcoming, and gender-appropriate services.

**"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) Access to Income and Education

Inadequate education, income, and employment are well-established risk factors contributing to people cycling in and out of homelessness. All of these are linked, and can increase future risk of homelessness. There is an extensive body of research that analyzes the costs to the individual and society over the course of a lifetime of failure to complete high school (Hankivsky, 2009; Levin, 2005; Levin et al. 2007). "Directly or indirectly, high school non-completion has enormous fiscal implications in terms of expenditures on health, social services and programs, education, employment, criminality, and lower economic productivity" (Hankivsky, 2009, p. 9).

Supporting both those at risk, as well as formerly homeless young people, to earn an income and obtain an education is key to addressing housing stability in the long term.

- 1) **Educational engagement and achievement** – Many of those who experience homelessness have failed to complete high school, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage in the labour market. The [Without a Home](#) study (Gaetz et al., 2016) found that 53% of the participants had dropped out of high school (compared to the national average of less than 9%), and 50% were not currently in employment, education, or training. This is not necessarily a result of young people rejecting school. Research has found that many youth aspire to reconnect with education, but housing instability gets in the way (Day & Paul, 2007; Gaetz et al., 2016). Research on family homelessness indicates that Critical Time Interventions<sup>1</sup> are showing efficacy at improving educational engagement for children and youth (Shinn et al., 2015). For young people who are interested, there should be supports for (re)engagement with school.
- 2) **Employment training** – Some individuals who are homeless have a weak history of employment, or do not have specialized skills to compete in an increasingly skilled labour market. These youth can benefit from training and skills development that will support them to attain the jobs they desire. Social enterprise models and youth employment programs that offer appropriate supports to prepare youth for the working world show promise for improving young people's ability to find gainful and personally fulfilling employment.
- 3) **Income and employment** – Some youth may not be interested in formal education and training, and would rather access employment immediately. Other youth, due to illness, injury, or other forms of incapacitation, may not be easily employable in the short-, medium- or long-term, and may need income supports. Additionally, low wage jobs and the high cost of housing and other basic needs will cause some young people to need income supports to keep them out of poverty and homelessness. In addition to access to minimum wage employment and employment training, having access to income supports and housing subsidies has been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of youths' housing stability (Frederick et al., 2014; Kidd et al., 2014; Rog & Buckner, 2007).

<sup>1</sup>[Critical Time Intervention \(CTI\)](#) is an "empirically supported, time-limited case management model designed to prevent homelessness in people with mental illness following discharge from hospitals, shelters, prisons and other institutions. This transitional period is one in which people often have difficulty re-establishing themselves in stable housing with access to needed supports. CTI works in two main ways: by providing emotional and practical support during the critical time of transition and by strengthening the individual's long-term ties to services, family, and friends" (Centre for the Advancement of Critical Time Intervention, 2009, p.1).

## 4) Complementary Supports

There are a number of other supports that facilitate housing stabilization and help individuals and families improve their quality of life, connect with community, and potentially achieve self-sufficiency:

- 1) Life skills** – For those with little experience of independent living or stable housing, life skills training, mentoring, and individual support that focuses on the enhancement of self-care and life skills should be made available.
- 2) Advocacy** – Clients may face challenges in advocating for their own rights and access to services and supports because of language barriers, stigma, and discrimination. Individuals may also be reluctant to enter certain institutional settings such as hospitals or mental health facilities because of past negative or traumatic experiences. In such cases, service providers can offer advice, support, advocacy, and transportation to assist people.
- 3) System navigation** – Providing support to navigate complex systems is essential for ensuring that formerly homeless young people and their families are able to work their way through systems and get access to the services and supports they need and are entitled to.
- 4) Peer support** – Having someone who has lived similar experiences talk and support you through challenging situations is often very important for individuals who are marginalized or who have experienced trauma in service settings. The [At Home/Chez Soi](#) project and other Housing First efforts have demonstrated that peer supports enhance housing stabilization (Nelson et al., 2016).
- 5) Parenting Support** – Some young people who are at risk of or who experience homelessness are also parents. They may need support in developing parenting skills and/or enabling the return of children that may have been taken into care.
- 6) Legal advice and representation** – Administrative, civil, and criminal legal barriers can have an impact on youths' access to benefits, education, employment, housing, treatment, and other services. Such barriers can present hard stops to housing stabilization, frustrating the efforts of youth as well as the providers who serve them, and ultimately getting in the way of successful and sustained exits from homelessness. Regardless of what the legal barrier may be, the reality is that only a lawyer or the court can remove legal barriers, which underscores the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to assisting youth experiencing homelessness.

## 5) Enhancing Social Inclusion

Key to the well-being of any person is their ability to nurture positive relationships with others, connect to communities, and become involved in activities that are meaningful and fulfilling. This is particularly crucial given that many young people who are homeless report having strained relationships friends, family, or carers (Crane et al., 2014).

Enhancing social inclusion is particularly complex and deeply involved work. The [At Home/Chez Soi Study](#) found that for their largely adult cohort, the Housing First approach did not show promising results on social inclusion. Limited evidence exists on effective strategies for increasing social inclusion amongst youth within housing stabilization programs. This is possibly because longitudinal data in this area is rare. Discussions with young people (Slesnick et al., 2017; Schwan et al., 2018a; Thistle, 2017), and longitudinal studies on youth (Kidd et al., 2016) indicate that housing stability is greatly improved when youth are able to connect with others, reconnect with family, and access to a range of sustainable supports. Gains in youths' community integration and quality of life can take time for young people to develop. One follow-up study (Kidd et al., 2016) found that after a year of being housed, young people did not experience significant gains in community integration and quality of life, demonstrating the need for longer-term social inclusion supports for youth.

### Efforts to support the social inclusion of youth who have experienced homelessness should include:

- 1) **Developing and strengthening healthy social relationships and connections** – Young people should be supported in developing positive relationships with peers, community members, employers, colleagues, landlords, and others in their community.
- 2) **Enhancing family and natural supports** – Families can be an important source of ongoing support for people throughout the entire life cycle. Youth in particular require healthy and permanent relationships with caring adults as they transition into adulthood. Reconnection and reunification with family for formerly homeless young people is an important intervention that can contribute to their longer term housing stability (Winland et al., 2011). Drawing attention to the importance of strengthening family and natural supports, Braciszewski and colleagues' (2016) longitudinal study of 243 homeless adolescents concluded that youth exiting homelessness are "often able to achieve stable housing quickly and with long-term security, generally in their parents' homes" (p. 6), suggesting the importance of family reunification strategies and tailored family-based interventions to promote housing stability. The [Making the Shift](#) project is currently conducting demonstration projects on how to effectively do this work.

- 3) **Community engagement and integration** – The opportunity to engage with communities of choice, whether people and institutions in the local neighbourhood, or making cultural connections, is also important to well-being. Important research by Naomi Thulien and colleagues (2018) demonstrate that once young people are housed, they often lack opportunities to extend their social networks and have “very little access to the informal knowledge commonly passed between friends and family regarding how to get ahead in life” (p. 95). These findings suggest the need for greater investments in community engagement and integration efforts, including through programs that facilitate the development of social capital (e.g., mentorship programs) and meaningful opportunities for young people to expand their social networks (Thulien et al., 2018).
- 4) **Cultural connection** – Cultural and spiritual connections are important for many people, and if desired, young people should be supported to engage in cultural and spiritual traditions. This is particularly important for Indigenous youth who, as a result of the intergenerational experience of colonialism and trauma, may have estranged relationships with their culture and community.
- 5) **Engagement in meaningful activities** – People should be provided with the opportunity to pursue their interests and participate in meaningful activities such as arts, sports, or volunteering, in order to learn new skills, develop relationships, and socialize.



**Thulien and colleagues’ study (2018) on formerly homeless young people found that: “The participants’ challenge was not in merely maintaining a home with meager resources, but doing so amid constant reminders that they were in a lower socioeconomic position – poor, undereducated, and inadequately employed. Chronic precarity permeated every aspect of participants’ lives, from maintaining a home to developing fragile new identities as self-sufficient adults. This precarity threatened to destroy their belief that they were the masters of their own destinies” (p.96-97).**





## Considering Housing Stabilization for Indigenous Youth

One of the consequences of historical and ongoing colonization and discrimination in Canada is that Indigenous peoples, who make up 4.5% of the Canadian population, are significantly over-represented in homeless populations (Segaert, 2012), making up 30% of the national youth homelessness population (Gaetz et al., 2016). Dr. Suzanne Stewart and others (Monette et al., 2009; Stewart, 2016, 2018; Walker, 2008) have identified multiple barriers faced by Indigenous peoples in accessing housing that is safe, affordable, and appropriate, which include “poverty, lack of access to culturally appropriate social services and housing, literacy issues, discrimination, addiction, mental health problems, and intergenerational trauma resulting from experiences with residential schools and the child welfare system. Systemic racism affects access to housing and supports” (Stewart, 2018, p. 89).

Mainstream/colonial thinking about the nature of homelessness is insufficient to describe the experience of homelessness among Indigenous youth. The [Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada](#) (Thistle, 2017) contends that for Indigenous peoples, homelessness is much more than the lack of a house, but is an undermining of ‘All My Relations’, which is the connection and unity to all things, including culture, land, and people. Homelessness for Indigenous peoples is also an experience of isolation from “relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities” (Thistle, 2017, p.6). For Indigenous youth, solutions to homelessness will not only require housing, but facilitating improved well-being, cultural connection, and opportunities for healing.

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

**Vancouver Youth**

To best support Indigenous youth to exit homelessness in a sustainable way, it is important to acknowledge and address past and present tensions between Western individualist approaches to health and well-being, and more holistic Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing, focusing on cultural connections, relationships, and community. Colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and separation from family and community can leave Indigenous youth with a sense of dislocation and alienation from their culture and ways of knowing, which can be exacerbated by homelessness. The ability to connect to culture, communities, and traditional practices, when desired, is important for healing among Indigenous youth.



While the range of services and supports outlined in the sections above are applicable to Indigenous youth, it is possible to adapt and infuse them with Indigenous ways of knowing to make them more culturally relevant. Duran (2007) refers to hybrid approaches to therapy and healing, bringing together the knowledge, techniques, and practices that reflect both Indigenous and mainstream approaches. Stewart suggests that “(h)ybridism allows the practitioner and the client to jointly explore the client’s identity, culture, and worldview in order to clarify the client’s needs and determine the appropriate interventions for facilitating healing” (Stewart, 2018, p. 96).

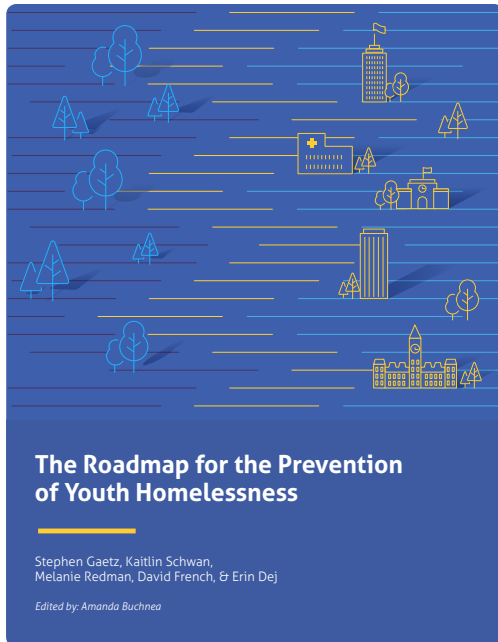
Whether looking at youth homelessness prevention or housing stabilization, Indigenous peoples must have a leadership role in the design and implementation of solutions, to ensure culturally appropriate housing and supports are made available to Indigenous youth. Interventions must be infused with traditional knowledge, and account for the impacts of colonialism and intergenerational trauma that continue to impact young people. Embracing the importance of cultural connection and Indigenous ways of knowing as part of housing stabilization not only advances better and more inclusive outcomes for Indigenous youth, but can also potentially inform how we work with all young people at risk of or who experience homelessness.

## Conclusion

**Youth’s path out of homelessness and into housing is mired with adversity. It is incumbent upon us to design interventions that make this path as easy to traverse as possible, providing young people with meaningful supports that extend beyond the provision of four walls and a roof. In order to do this, we need to invest in not just in a range of affordable housing models, but supports for social inclusion, well-being and health, identity development, and opportunities for education, employment, and training.**

Once housed, the work begins to repair, reconnect, and rebuild, implementing supports that can assist a young person’s transition to adulthood. This requires that we take on a new level of organizational preparedness, strategy, and commitment to young people. Stability depends on how we engage young people and what support we wrap around them (e.g., mental health, addiction, family reconnection, trauma-informed care, and community connection). It is time to provide youth exiting homelessness with *all* of the supports they need to maintain that housing long term. It is time to think about successful housing stabilization as more than just having a place to live.

Housing Stabilization is only one part of youth homelessness prevention, and should be combined with other preventative interventions and policies in order to be maximally effective. A comprehensive framework for youth homelessness prevention can be found in [\*The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness\*](#).



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