Structural Prevention of Youth Homelessness

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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 <u>consultations across the country</u>, 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 **structural prevention** – a key component of any comprehensive approach to youth homelessness prevention.

This report outlines 8 forms of structural youth homelessness prevention:

1) Poverty Reduction

2) Increasing the Availability of Affordable Housing

3) Addressing Inequity and Discrimination

4) Structural Prevention of Homelessness for Indigenous Youth

5) Breaking the Link Between Youth Homelessness, Migration, and Displacement

6) Promoting Social Inclusion for All Youth

7) Preventing and Reducing Adverse Childhood Experiences

8) Youth Homelessness Prevention Legislation & Policy

__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.

1. Structural Prevention
2. Systems Prevention
3. Early Intervention
4. Eviction Prevention
5. Housing Stabilization

Duty to Assist

Ending Youth Homelessness
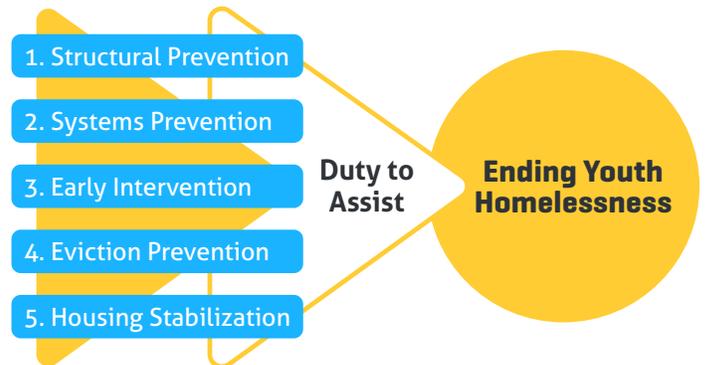
Homelessness Prevention Typology

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.

Structural Prevention:
Working Upstream to Address Underlying Causes of Youth Homelessness

Some of the key drivers of youth homelessness are embedded within the arrangement of society's structures and institutions. Such arrangements shape how the housing market is regulated, wealth is redistributed, our cities are designed, and resources and power are allocated in Canadian society.

These arrangements can contribute to housing precarity and homelessness for some young people, and can contribute to the relational dynamics that precede youth homelessness. Because these factors originate at the societal level, young people and their families have more limited ability or opportunity to change structural factors.

In order to prevent youth homelessness, we must address the broad social, economic, and political factors that contribute to housing precarity and social exclusion. By doing so, we reduce the risk that any young person will become homeless. This is the work of structural prevention, and is one of five types of prevention outlined in *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness.*

Defining Structural Prevention

Gaetz and Dej (2017) state that "Structural prevention addresses structural and systemic factors that contribute to housing precarity and social exclusion, exposing some individuals and families to a greater risk of homelessness" (p. 47). Structural prevention interventions can be universal (aimed at the entire population), or be targeted toward at specific groups who face a higher risk of homelessness (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ youth (Gaetz et al., 2016)). Structural prevention typically involves public policy, legislation, and interventions that increase housing stability, economic security, and social inclusion. Examples include raising the rates of social assistance, lowering the cost of public transportation, or ensuring access to appropriate and affordable housing and healthcare. Gaetz and Dej (2017) note, "such programs' policies and legislation are rarely titled 'homelessness prevention' (and may not even explicitly reference it), but will have the outcome of building assets and reducing the risk that someone will fall into homelessness" (p. 47).

Why Structural Prevention?

Research has shown that structural factors such as the lack of affordable housing, poverty, and discrimination are causes of homelessness for young people (Baskin, 2007; Gaetz, 2014; Nooe & Patterson, 2010). In fact, some research indicates that low incomes and housing market dynamics are the two key determinants of homelessness for both families and individuals (Culhane, Metraux, & Byrne, 2011; Quigley & Raphael, 2002). In Canada, major increases in homelessness in the 1980's and 1990's have been traced to massive divestments from affordable housing and reduced spending on social and health supports, effectively 'de-housing' many individuals who were housed at one time (Hulchanski, 2009; Gaetz et al., 2014d).

> **Research has shown that the countries with the lowest rates of homelessness, including Denmark and Finland, have typically made substantial investments in affordable housing (O'Sullivan, 2017).**

Fortunately, there is evidence that structural changes can reduce homelessness. Countries with poverty reduction strategies and robust welfare states often have lower rates of both homelessness and child poverty (Fitzpatrick & Stephens, 2007; Olsson & Nordfeldt, 2008). Research has shown that the countries with the lowest rates of homelessness, including Denmark and Finland, have typically made substantial investments in affordable housing (O'Sullivan, 2017). Such data suggests the efficacy of structural prevention for reducing risk factors at the population level -- efforts that can be combined with other prevention efforts (e.g., early intervention) to assist those at imminent risk of homelessness.

Who is Responsible for Structural Prevention?

The vast majority of structural prevention policies, investments, and interventions lie outside of the domain of the homelessness sector.

Structural prevention involves social and economic policy, practice, and legislative change within public institutions and systems, such as housing, healthcare, justice, and education. While the homelessness sector has historically been tasked with addressing the consequences of structural and systems failures, it is not within the sector's locus of control to implement many of the structural changes will prevent youth homelessness. Structural prevention efforts require shared leadership, investment, and action between many government ministries and departments within each order of government, some of which may not have previously had an explicit a role in homelessness prevention. It also means that the majority of funding provided to the homelessness sector should remain committed to ensuring that those experiencing homelessness, or at immediate risk of homelessness, are able to quickly and effectively access the services, supports, and housing they need to avoid or exit homelessness.

While structural prevention is a critical component of youth homelessness prevention, there are challenges to implementing and evaluating structural prevention efforts. These include high costs, challenges to targeting interventions, and difficulty measuring direct or indirect effects of such interventions (Shinn, Baumohl, & Hopper, 2001).

It is critical that we pursue structural change knowing that many of these efforts may take a long time to implement, and may only occur with the persistent, concerted effort of many individuals and groups. While pursuing these long-term structural changes, other evidence-based interventions can immediately help prevent youth homelessness.

Key Forms of Structural Prevention

Structural prevention takes many forms, and can be targeted to individuals, families, communities, or the entire population. Because the structural factors that drive homelessness are often intersecting and mutually reinforcing, it is important that multiple forms of structural prevention are deployed simultaneously. The good news is that structural prevention in one area may trigger positive effects in other areas. For example, increases to social assistance rates can improve individuals' and families' access to affordable housing by bringing market rent within reach, and possibly decreasing the overall demand for deeply affordable social housing units.

This section outlines 8 key forms of structural youth homelessness prevention:

1) Poverty Reduction

2) Increasing the Availability of Affordable Housing

3) Addressing Inequity and Discrimination

4) Structural Prevention of Homelessness for Indigenous Youth

5) Breaking the Link Between Youth Homelessness, Migration, and Displacement

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1) Poverty Reduction

Despite being a wealthy country, 1 in 7 people in Canada live in poverty (*Canada Without Poverty, 2017*).

Poverty undermines the health and well-being of young people, contributing to poor educational outcomes, social exclusion, violence, and early home leaving (Ayllon, 2015; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; McAra & McVie, 2016; Pantazis, Gordon, & Levitas, 2006). Research has shown that poverty and homeless are strongly correlated (Embleton et al., 2016). While poverty does not cause every low-income youth to become homelessness, it does mean that some youth and their families are only one illness, one accident, one job loss, or one paycheque away from living on the streets. In addition, extreme poverty puts pressure on families that can produce financial stress, which in turn can destabilize relationships, lead to conflict, and affect mechanisms to cope with crisis or challenges (Banovcinova et al., 2014; Wadsworth & Berger, 2006).

Lack of income is the basis of poverty, meaning that when people experience poverty they lack the income needed to meet their basic needs.

The goal of poverty reduction is to ensure that all families and young people have the income they need to meet their basic needs and obtain safe, secure, and permanent housing, thereby contributing to homelessness prevention.

"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

Strategies for reducing poverty in Canada include:

(1) Increasing the availability of permanent, secure, living-wage employment;
(2) Increasing social assistance rates, and access to social assistance supports; and
(3) Implementing more progressive taxation to better support low-income earners.

Policy tools and legislation that can support these strategies might include:

› Amending provincial/territorial social assistance policies to enable young people to access income supports when living independently.

› Reducing the cost of child care in Canada through strategies such as provincial/territorial funding to support the operation of licenced child care facilities, rather than leaving fees and operational support to be determined by the market (Macdonald & Friendly, 2017).

› Implementing provincial/territorial policies that ensure minimum wages are *living wages*, meaning that minimum-wage jobs enable individuals and families to afford housing, food, transportation, healthcare, childcare, and other basic necessities within their communities.

› Amending the Employment Insurance eligibility criteria to ensure youth who have been working non-standard jobs are able to access EI benefits (Expert Panel on Youth Employment, 2017).

› Reinstating minimum national standards for income assistance in all provinces and territories (Dignity for All, 2017).

As we seek to reduce poverty in Canada, we must particularly focus on dramatically increasing employment opportunities for Indigenous Peoples, one quarter of whom live in poverty (Citizens for Public Justice, 2011). This must involve tackling the structural and systemic barriers to employment for Indigenous youth, including discriminatory hiring practices and inequitable access to education.

2) Increasing the Availability of Affordable Housing

Research from around the world has shown that a lack of safe, affordable housing is a key cause of homelessness (Brisson & Covert, 2015; Culhane, Metraux, & Byrne, 2011; Poppe & Gale, 2018). Canada has a critical shortage of affordable housing (Gaetz et al., 2014d), and national studies indicate that 18% of low-income families in Canada are living in extreme core housing need (Londerville & Steele, 2014).

> **"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**

Living in unaffordable, poor quality, or overcrowded housing increases nutritional vulnerability for children and youth (Krieger & Higgins, 2002), negatively impacts school attendance (Simpson & Fowler, 1994), contributes to health problems (Jelleyman & Spencer, 2008), and can lead to child welfare involvement (Nichols et al., 2017). Once on their own, many young people also find it difficult to access affordable housing, often due to lack of financial supports and low-paying jobs (Gaetz, 2014).

Fortunately, research indicates that investments in affordable housing can assist in reducing homelessness (Fitzpatrick & Stephens, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2017; Pleace, Teller, & Quilgars, 2011). Access to affordable housing has been shown to improve the health outcomes of vulnerable infants and children (Sandel et al., 2016), as well as improve school engagement and achievement (Lubell & Brennan, 2007; Schwartz, 2011).

There are two main strategies that increase the availability of affordable housing:

(1) Investment in the creation, repair, and maintenance of public/social housing stock; and

(2) Cash assistance to prevent housing loss or assist individuals in obtaining market housing they would otherwise be unable to afford (Parsell & Marston, 2012).

The availability of affordable housing can be supported and youth homelessness prevented by:

❯ Expanding the availability of housing subsidies for youth and their families (Rog & Buckner, 2007; Shinn et al., 2001). Some studies have demonstrated that subsidizing housing costs for very low-income people has the strongest effect on lowering homelessness rates in comparison to other types of interventions (Quigley, Raphael, & Smolensky, 2001).

❯ Creating a range of affordable housing models targeted to youth to meet their diverse needs. Finland, for example, has developed a unique youth-specific housing system (operated by the Finnish Youth Housing Association) that provides housing to young people transitioning to independence between the ages of 18-29 (Pleace et al., 2015).

❯ Establishing and expanding eviction prevention programs and services that offer a range of interventions and supports, including financial supports, legal advice and representation, landlord mediation, and case management supports (Holl, van den Dries, & Wolf, 2016).

Practice Spotlight: Community Land Trusts

Rapid gentrification and development remains a key challenge to ensuring housing remains affordable in some urban centres. The Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT) developed a 'community land trust' in response to these changing neighbourhood dynamics in Toronto's Parkdale community. A community land trust is a "non-profit organization that obtains land (through either purchase or donation) and holds it in perpetuity for the community. A unique mechanism of the CLT model is that it separates the ownership of the land (owned by the CLT) from the ownership of the buildings on that land … This dual ownership structure allows a CLT to maintain a level of affordability by taking land out of the real estate market" (Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust, 2015, p.2). Hogan's Alley Land Trust in Vancouver is another excellent example of a community land trust in action.

3) Addressing Inequity and Discrimination

Inequity and discrimination can contribute to a risk of homelessness for young people and their families. Ageism, sexism, racism, colonialism, ethnocentrism, cissexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression cause particular groups of youth to face disproportionate challenges when obtaining housing, employment, healthcare, social services, and good-quality education. Discrimination and inequity manifest at both the individual level (e.g., when a landlord will not rent to a young person because of their religion), and at the community level (e.g., when there is limited healthcare services available in a socio-economically depressed area). Structural and systemic inequity and discrimination deny young people their fundamental human rights, at times including the right to life.

INEQUITY

Instances of avoidable injustice or unfairness experienced by individuals or groups.

DISCRIMINATION

The unjust or prejudicial treatment of people on the basis of their identity/identities or personal characteristics, including on the grounds of race, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, religion, immigration status, or other identities.

We know that discrimination is a structural driver of homelessness because young people of particular races, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and abilities are overrepresented among homeless youth populations (Gaetz et al., 2016). In Canada, Indigenous youth (Belanger et al., 2013), black youth, and gender and sexual minority youth (Gaetz et al., 2016) are all overrepresented in homeless youth populations, implicating racism, colonialism, homophobia, and transphobia as structural drivers of youth homelessness (Abramovich, 2013; Gaetz et al., 2017; Gattis, 2009).

"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

Youth homelessness prevention must be grounded in equity and anti-discrimination work – both at the structural level and within public systems and sectors.

This type of prevention work reduces the risk that discrimination or inequity would contribute to homelessness for *any* youth, as well as for youth from groups that *systematically* experience inequity and discrimination, such as young women, LGBTQ2S+ youth, and Indigenous youth.

At a policy level, this work can begin with the identification and elimination of federal, provincial/ territorial, and municipal policies, laws, and protocols that directly or indirectly discriminate against youth or their families, including on the basis of housing status (Schwan et al., 2018a). Policy tools and programmatic interventions that may assist in this task include:

> The enforcement of anti-discrimination laws in both private and public systems, including by disciplining and fining employers, landlords, agencies, and organizations for discriminatory policies and practices (OHCHR, 2017).

> The implementation of policies and legislation that ensure swift and equitable access to justice and remedies for all youth who have experienced discrimination or inequity (OHCHR, 2017).

> Ensuring that our education systems proactively focus on equity and anti-discrimination within their policies, curricula, teacher education and training, hiring, and supports for students.

> Investigation and elimination of police practices that profile, target, and criminalize young people who are poor or experiencing homelessness (O'Grady, Gaetz, & Buccieri, 2011).

> Government policies that ensure municipalities and provinces/territories 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 (Abramovich, 2016; Schwan et al., 2018a).

4) Structural Prevention of Homelessness for Indigenous Youth

Indigenous youth are significantly overrepresented in youth homeless populations across Canada (Gaetz et al., 2016), as well as within criminal justice and child protection systems (Statistics Canada, 2018). Indigenous women and girls are three times more likely to be victims of violent crimes, and half of children in foster care are Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2018). This is the direct result of centuries of colonization and racism that have attempted to erase Indigenous social, economic, and governance systems, as well as Indigenous family structures, spiritual practices, and cultural traditions. This has resulted in severe disadvantage, poverty, dislocation, and intergenerational trauma for Indigenous youth and their families. These factors contribute to the disproportionate risk of homelessness that many Indigenous young people face (Patrick, 2014; Thistle, 2017). Against all odds, Indigenous youth report higher rates of resiliency than other groups of youth experiencing homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016).

It is critical that we understand Indigenous homelessness as involving the historic and ongoing disruption of 'All My Relations' within Indigenous communities (Thistle, 2017).

The *Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada* articulates that Indigenous homelessness involves more than 'houselessness,' but includes isolation from "relationships to land, water, place, family, kin, each other, animals, cultures, languages and identities" (Thistle, 2017, p. 6). In order to effectively prevent homelessness for Indigenous youth, we must address the roots and layered effects of all 12 Dimensions of Indigenous Homelessness, including "spiritual disconnection homelessness," "cultural disintegration and loss homelessness," and "nowhere to go homelessness" (Thistle, 2017).

"Indigenous homelessness has been incorrectly understood by settlers as being without a structure of habitation or being roofless (Somerville, 1992), when Indigenous homelessness is also about being without All My Relations. Being without a physical structure is only a symptom of the root causes of Indigenous homelessness, which are being without healthy social, cultural, spiritual, emotional and physical relationships (Christensen, 2013)."

(Thistle, 2017, p. 16]

EARTH   **LAND**   **STORIES**   **PLANTS**   **ANIMALS**

As part of this work, it is particularly critical that we implement the Calls to Action articulated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, including those that concern youth and particularly Indigenous youth and families involved with the child welfare system. The inequity experienced by Indigenous youth in the child welfare system was acknowledged in a landmark ruling by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal in 2016, which ruled that the federal government discriminates against Indigenous children on-reserve by failing to provide the same level of child welfare services that exist elsewhere. *Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada - A Proposal for Action* (2017) outlines some key government actions that need to be taken in this area, including recommending that the Government of Canada "provide additional investments to support Indigenous-led reforms of child protection" (p. 14).

Strategies to support the structural prevention of homelessness for Indigenous youth might include:

> Immediate government action to address the epidemic of violence towards Indigenous women and girls, informed by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls;

> Protection of Indigenous Peoples' rights to self-determination, self-governance, and autonomy in all domains of society, enshrined in law and policy;

> Public system transformation to ensure Indigenous Peoples are treated respectfully, fairly, equitably, and with cultural sensitivity in all Canadian institutions and systems, including the child welfare system, and;

> Investments in programs, supports, and services that can best support the education, health, wellbeing, self-determination, spirituality, and community connection of Indigenous youth (Sauvé et al., 2018).

Young experts who participated in the *What Would it Take?* (2018) study called for several important interventions they felt would help prevent homelessness for Indigenous youth, including:

> The adoption of a national strategy to prevent and end homelessness for Indigenous youth.

"Even when you can can't connect to family, you should still have access to culture."

Vancouver Youth

> Investments in the creation of cultural centres and Friendship Centres for Indigenous youth and their communities, with a view to creating opportunities for Indigenous youth to participate in cultural journeys, learn about their culture and heritage, connect with peers, learn from Elders, and access traditional medicines and healing practices.

> Free counselling, family mediation, and mental health supports for survivors of residential schools and their families, including within the foster care system.

5) Breaking the Link between Youth Homelessness, Migration, and Displacement

Experiences of migration and displacement can contribute to the risk of homelessness for some families and young people. When moving from their home countries or communities, by choice or by force, young people may struggle to access housing, social services, education, employment, and healthcare in their new context (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003; CAMH & CASC, 2014; Preston et al., 2009; Ratnam et al., 2018). Recent research indicates that 31.4% of new immigrants and refugees in Canada live in poverty (Citizens for Public Justice, 2017), and 10.1% of youth experiencing homelessness in Canada were born in another country (Gaetz et al., 2016). Studies also indicate that one quarter of newcomer youth experiencing homelessness arrived in Canada within the past five years (Ratnam et al., 2018). The *Without a Home* study found that newcomer youth were more likely than other groups to have multiple experiences of homelessness (64.3%), and other studies have demonstrated an overrepresentation of newcomer youth in hidden homeless populations (Preston et al., 2011).

Newcomer youth face unique challenges in securing stable housing and the protection of their human rights. *Hidden in Our Midst* (2014), a study focused on the experiences of newcomer youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto, revealed that young people faced challenges such as:

> "Differences in parent and child expectations around the practice of religious and cultural values in Canada;

> Challenges living with a host family in Canada;

> Racism when seeking housing and employment;

> Different cultural expectations and understanding of what constitute physical abuse and acceptable forms of child discipline; and

> Fear of shaming their parents by leaving home or seeking service supports."

(Ratnam et al., 2018, p. 113)

Both public systems and the youth homelessness sector must be responsive to the unique experiences of newcomer youth, ensuring systems change is implemented with cultural humility (Ratnam et al., 2018), and through the meaningful participation, inclusion, and leadership of newcomer youth themselves.

More broadly, it is critical to understand the connections between youth homelessness, migration, and displacement, the causes of which are multiple and varied. Millions of young people are forced to migrate each year for reasons including war and conflict, occupation, economic destabilization, colonization, human rights violations, or to flee persecution (United Nations, 2013). Climate change powerfully contributes to the natural disasters that are driving migration in some parts of the world (Crate & Nuttall, 2009). Forces of development and gentrification also dislocate people from their communities and livelihoods (Kennelly & Watt, 2011), and many Indigenous communities in Canada continue to be forced to migrate as a result of environmental destruction and resource extraction projects (Thistle, 2017).

These complex linkages between youth homelessness, migration, and displacement require action in three areas:

1) Policy reform to ensure newcomers have equitable access healthcare, social services, housing, justice, and education;

2) Investment in targeted supports and services for newcomer youth and their families, including people who have precarious legal status; and

3) International and domestic policy reform to address the structural drivers that contribute to forced migration (e.g., conflict, colonization, climate change).

This work can be supported by policies and investments such as:

> The adoption of 'sanctuary city' policies within all Canadian cities, which "provide access to municipal services without fear of detection, detention, or deportation, for residents without full immigration status and/or without full status documents from the federal government" (Canadian Labour Congress, 2018). This should include the adoption of 'sanctuary school' policies in Canadian schools in order to ensure equitable access to education for youth with precarious legal status.

> Targeted investment to expand settlement services for newcomer youth (age 13 – 24) to ensure these young people and their families have access to robust services and supports, including legal supports (CAMH & CASC, 2014).

> The expansion of rent subsidies and housing vouchers for newcomer youth, in addition to investment in rent-geared-to-income, subsidized, and co-op housing for newcomer youth (CAMH & CASC, 2014).

> Investment in green energy alternatives and the curbing of fossil fuel extraction within Canada, which contributes to the displacement of communities domestically and the global displacement of peoples due to climate change.

> Amendments to immigration detention practices that may keep children, young people, and their families or caregivers detained for unreasonable lengths of time, and often fail to assist individuals transitioning from immigration detention centres (thereby contributing to their risk of homelessness) (e.g., Canadian Council for Refugees, 2017).

6) Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences

Research has consistently identified family conflict and abuse as direct or indirect causes of youth homelessness (Karabanow & Naylor, 2013; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Gaetz, 2014). Youth who are homeless are more likely to have experienced significant childhood adversity such as sexual abuse, parental neglect, household substance abuse, and exposure to physical violence (Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz et al., 2016; McMorris et al., 2002; Rew et al., 2001; Tyler & Bersani, 2008). These challenges are commonly referred to as "adverse childhood experiences" (ACEs) and are an important social determinant of health. The *What Would it Take?* study demonstrated that youth who are homeless also experience ACEs within public systems (e.g., foster care).

> "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**

Given the connections between homelessness and childhood adversity, preventing ACEs is an important component of youth homelessness prevention.

What occurs in the first 1,000 days of a person's life powerfully impacts their development and well-being over the life course (Leroy et al., 2014). Research has shown that ACEs can have long-lasting effects on brain development, social development, and decision-making (Baker-Collins, 2013; Sokolowski et al., 2013). This is evident in homeless youth populations, with national data indicating that young people who experience childhood adversity before becoming homeless are more likely to attempt suicide, experience poorer mental health, and have a lower quality of life than youth who did not have these experiences (Kidd et al., 2017). Given the connections between homelessness and childhood adversity, preventing ACEs is an important component of youth homelessness prevention. Some studies support the efficacy of family-based interventions, such as parent education programs (Oral et al., 2016) and home visit programs (Neger & Prinz, 2015), but we also know that adversity can be reduced by building healthy communities and ensuring that families well-supported and have the resources they need to thrive (Biglan, Ryzin, & Hawkins, 2017).

The prevention of ACEs might include interventions such as:

> Low-cost or free family mediation and counselling to families facing housing precarity and other challenges. Evidence-based models, such as ecologically based family therapy, have been shown to improve family relations (Cully, Wu, & Slesnick, 2018; Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2005).

> The expansion of evidence-based violence prevention programs that aim to develop safe, stable, and nurturing relationships between children and their parents or caregivers. The World Health Organization (2010) identifies four types of these programs for which there is evidence: parenting programs (e.g., the Positive Parenting Program); parent and child programs (e.g., Early Head Start); social support groups (e.g., Parents Anonymous); and media interventions (e.g., the television series "Families").

> The implementation of ACE screening methods within primary healthcare settings and the education system in order to support rapid responses to ACEs, such as the screening tool implemented as part of the Geelong Project in Australia.

> Expanded early childhood education programs, particularly for youth from low-income families and neighbourhoods (McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2001).

> Maternal healthcare and parenting supports for new parents who face socio-economic challenges, health, or addiction challenges, or are parenting a child who has health, mental health, or addiction challenges (Cutts et al., 2018). There is a particular need for supports for young parents.

"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

7) Promoting Social Inclusion for All Youth

Social exclusion refers to the experiences and circumstances by which particular people are shut out of society's social, economic, political, and cultural institutions (Byrne, 1999; Mandianapour, 1998). This may happen when youth:

> Face barriers to staying in school (e.g., needing to work to support their family)

> Are unable to participate in community activities (e.g., activities that are inaccessible to youth with disabilities)

> Feel unsafe or discriminated against in healthcare settings (e.g., because of their gender presentation)

Social exclusion can result in social isolation, restricted access to opportunities, and more narrow life choices (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). Some of the key contributors to social exclusion for youth experiencing homelessness include: inadequate housing, lack of income, education disengagement, compromised health, weak social capital, chaotic lives, and interrupted adolescence (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002). This exclusion can be so complete that youth have no one to turn to when they become homeless (Schwan et al., 2018a).

Promoting social inclusion can involve many forms of structural change (e.g., poverty reduction), as well as targeted approaches to increase inclusivity within communities and neighbourhoods.

This can be supported by:

> Providing safe, confidential, and culturally-sensitive programming and supports for youth who are experiencing exclusion on the basis of their identities (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ youth), substance use, mental health or disability challenges, engagement in criminalized activities (e.g., drug dealing), or affiliations (e.g., gang affiliation).

> Providing opportunities for young people to become more involved in politics and political decision-making, ensuring that youth who face barriers to involvement (e.g., language barriers, disabilities) are effectively supported and included.

> Eliminate 'zero tolerance' policies in schools that function to remove youth from mainstream educational institutions and contribute to their criminal justice involvement, sometimes referred to as the 'school-to-prison pipeline' (Heitzeg, 2009).

8) Youth Homelessness Prevention Legislation & Policy

Legislation and social policy can guide, strengthen, enforce, and defend structural prevention efforts. As explained in *A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention* (Gaetz & Dej, 2017), "government legislation and policy can and should play an important role in (a) identifying and addressing the drivers of homelessness, (b) setting out government responsibilities, goals, and objectives, (c) providing policy and funding context to support local communities, and (d) articulating how different government departments work together towards that end" (p. 52).

Important examples of international legislation that target the prevention of homelessness include England's *Homelessness Reduction Act* (2017); the *Housing (Wales) Act* (2014); Washington State's *Homeless Youth Prevention and Protection Act* (2015); and Ireland's National *Homeless Prevention Strategy* (2002). Though research on the effects of these is preliminary, evaluations of the *Housing (Wales) Act* (2014) suggest that the legislation has resulted in a reduction of the number of people experiencing homelessness, including youth (Mackie, Thomas, & Bibbings, 2017). As we move towards youth homelessness prevention in Canada, it is essential to learn from other countries that have been implementing and evaluating the efficacy of prevention efforts. Particular attention should be given to how prevention policies and legislation are impacting youth, and how these approaches can be best adapted in the Canadian context. For example, the *Roadmap* examines how to adapt Duty to Assist legislation from other countries, such as Wales, into the Canadian context.

> **By almost any measure, youth homelessness is a violation of youths' human rights, and must be responded to as such.**

Whatever form it takes, Canadian youth homelessness prevention policy and legislation must be grounded in human rights. As outlined in *Youth Rights, Right Now* (2016), Canada is signatory on numerous international treatises outlining young people's human rights to housing, education, health, food, and an adequate standard of living. These treaties include the OHCHR Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. By almost any measure, youth homelessness is a violation of youths' human rights, and must be responded to as such. As we move toward implementing the right to housing in Canada, announced as part of the National Housing Strategy, it is essential that advocates push for the entrenchment of specific, legislated obligations and accountabilities across all orders of government to uphold this right.

Conclusion

In order to be maximally effective, youth homelessness prevention should tackle the underlying structural factors that put young people at risk of homelessness, such as poverty, colonization, insufficient health supports, and lack of affordable housing. These factors primarily originate in societal structures and systems, such as the labour market economy, housing market, education systems, and democratic institutions. Structural prevention is not the sole responsibility of the homelessness sector, and government investments in community-based homelessness initiatives should not be used to address structural issues that create risk of homelessness. Rather, structural prevention requires public sector innovation and transformation, bold political leadership, and substantial investments in Canada's social safety net. Addressing youth homelessness is a 'fusion policy' issue, needing both public will and ongoing collaboration across all orders of government and public systems.

> **Structural prevention 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._**

The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness

Stephen Gaetz, Kaitlin Schwan, Melanie Redman, David French, & Erin Dej

Edited by: Amanda Buchnea
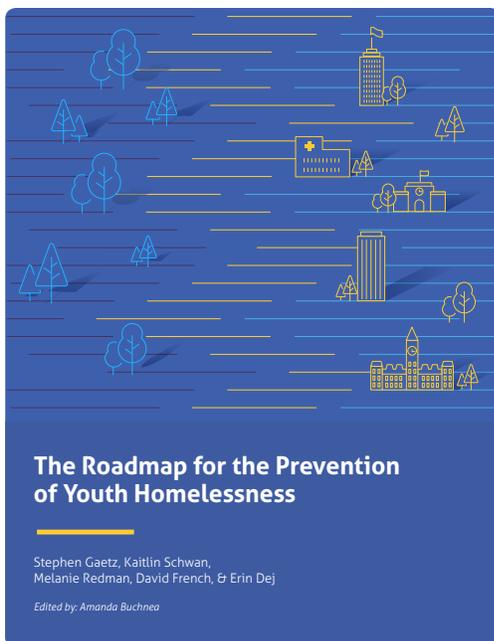
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The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness

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