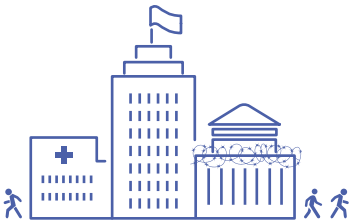
Systems Prevention of Youth Homelessness



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

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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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canadian observatory on homelessness

A WAY HOME VERS UN CHEZ-SOI CANADA

THE HOME DEPOT CANADA FOUNDATION

The Orange Door Project — Housing and hope for homeless youth

Canada

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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 ***systems prevention*** – a key component of any comprehensive approach to youth homelessness prevention. This report outlines three primary domains of systems prevention:

1) *Transition supports for youth exiting public institutions and systems.*
2) *Enhancing youths' ability to equitably access and benefit from public systems, supports, and entitlements.*
3) *Improving youths' experiences and outcomes in public systems.*

***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

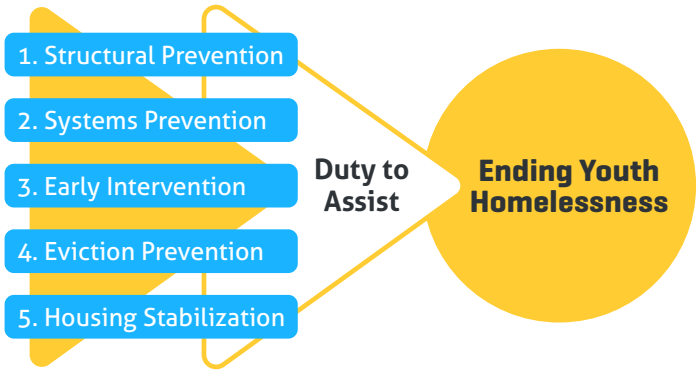
Despite broad political and community-based interest in youth homelessness prevention, there has been lack of clarity about what it entails. We offer the following definition of youth homelessness prevention:

> **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.

Systems Prevention:

How Public Systems Can be Reformed to Prevent Youth Homelessness

There is now a better understanding of the ways in which public systems (e.g., criminal justice, child welfare, healthcare, education) are implicated in young people's pathways into homelessness. Negative experiences, system gaps, silos, barriers to supports, and insufficient or underfunded services can all increase a young person's risk of homelessness

Moreover, many young people who are in the care of public systems, such as child protection, are not adequately supported when they transition out of care. Public systems issues can also make it difficult for young people to exit homelessness, particularly in the context of structural issues, such as limited affordable housing. In fact, many young people in Canada trace their homelessness back to systems failures, and identify systems change as the most effective form of youth homelessness prevention (Schwan et al., 2018a).

Youth homelessness prevention must involve restructuring our systems to work in ways that *decrease* a young person's likelihood of becoming homeless, and *increase* their chances of health, safety, self-determination, education, meaningful employment, belonging, and housing stability. In order to be effective, youth homelessness prevention must address the "institutional and systems failures that either indirectly or directly contribute to the risk of homelessness" (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 44). This is the work of systems prevention, and is one of five types of prevention outlined in *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness.*

Defining Systems Prevention

Systems prevention of youth homelessness involves identifying and addressing policies, programs, and practices within public systems that create barriers to young people's access to supports, and which expose young people to the risk of homelessness.

It is critical that each public system *actively* seek to support youth in acquiring and maintaining stable housing. Each interaction with a teacher, doctor, coach, or counsellor is an opportunity to identify when a youth is at risk of homelessness, and leverage that interaction to produce better housing outcomes for young people. This means that preventing youth homelessness is a shared responsibility across all public systems.

What is Unique About Systems Prevention for Youth?

The public systems youth engage with, and the ways in which they are positioned within those systems, is unique. Firstly, some public systems are designed and mandated to meet the needs of children and youth as they progress through various developmental stages (e.g., secondary and post-secondary school, child welfare, the juvenile justice system). Additionally, some systems provide services or supports that are universal, regardless of a person's age, but may also offer supports or services targeted at young people (e.g., emergency medical care facilities that employ youth-focused social workers). Systems prevention must address the unique ways in which these different systems may be contributing to housing precarity homelessness for young people.

Across many public systems, age thresholds are key determinants of which services, supports, programs, and entitlements are available to youth. Being under 16 can mean a young person is unable to access mental health supports, get on a waitlist for youth housing, or access rent subsidies. Similarly, once a youth in care turns 18, they may be quickly removed from foster care and transitioned into a world in which they have drastically different legal, financial, and personal responsibilities. While these age markers are socially constructed and largely arbitrary, they profoundly shape *what* supports and programs young people can access, *how* they access them, and *what* entitlements and rights they have within them. This means that systems prevention for youth not only differs from adults, it may also look very different from youth to youth, depending on age and other factors.

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Key Forms of Systems Prevention

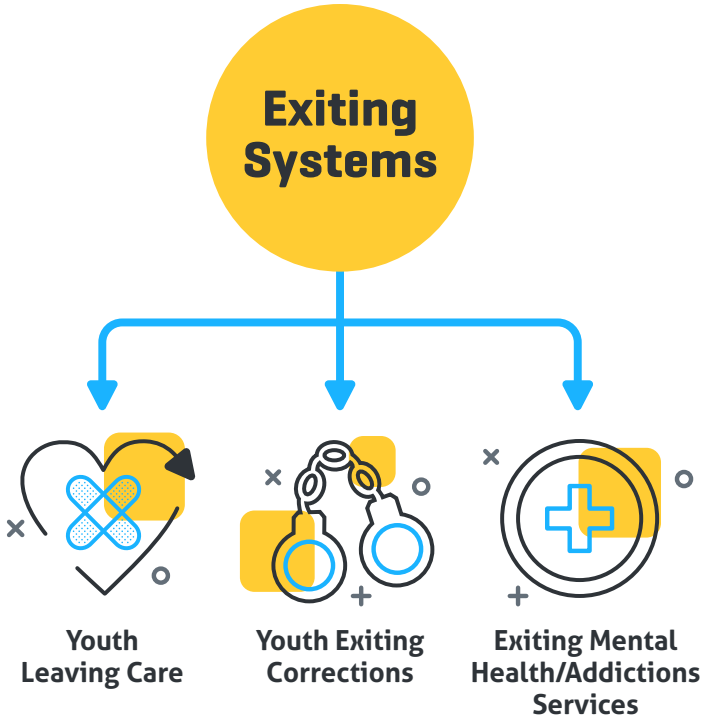
The systems prevention of youth homelessness involves three primary domains:

1) **Transition supports for youth exiting public institutions and systems, including for youth leaving care, corrections, and healthcare or mental healthcare settings.**
2) **Enhancing youths' ability to equitably access and benefit from public systems, supports, and entitlements, which can be achieved by improving "The Four 'A's": access, availability, affordability, and appropriateness.**
3) **Improving youths' experiences and outcomes in public systems, including by:**
   - Tackling discrimination and inequity in public systems;
   - Embedding youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination in public systems;
   - Responding to abuse and neglect in public systems; and
   - Addressing silos and gaps within and between government funded departments and systems, and also within non-profit sectors.

This section will detail some of the key actions that can be taken to implement systems prevention. Youth homelessness prevention strategies should employ all three forms of systems prevention simultaneously in order to be maximally effective.

1) Transition Supports for Youth Exiting Public Institutions and Systems

Research has consistently shown that transitions from public institutions or systems are common pathways into homelessness for young people (Gaetz et al., 2016; Nichols et al., 2017). After leaving care, corrections, immigration detention, or inpatient health or mental health services, young people often struggle to find affordable and appropriate housing. They may also struggle to reintegrate into community, reconnect with social supports, and re-engage with education, employment, or training. These transitions mark key opportunities to prevent youth homelessness. This section identifies tools and strategies to facilitate effective transitions from public institutions and systems for youth, detailing the transitional supports needed to ensure youth can thrive in their communities.



Supports for youth leaving care

National and international research has shown that youth who were taken into care by government child welfare systems – including foster care, group homes, and youth custodial centres - are overrepresented in homeless youth populations (Gaetz et al., 2016; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2012; Lemon Osterling & Hines, 2006). Studies have shown that transitions from care particularly contribute to homelessness, as well as poor health, education, and employment outcomes (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2011; Perez & Romo, 2011).

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

Montreal Youth

Findings from the *Without a Home* study (2016) revealed that over half of currently homeless youth in Canada had a history of child welfare involvement. Factors that contribute to difficult transitions include: inadequate education, poor health and mental health, limited social supports, and limited financial resources – all of which most young people rely on when moving into adulthood (Courtney & Huering, 2005).

Research indicates that housing stability can be improved through flexible subsidised, transitional, and supportive housing options for youth following transitions from care, in combination with education and employment assistance, healthcare, and life skills training (Courtney & Huering, 2005; Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin, 2009).

There are many innovative examples of practices, policy, and legislation that make these transitions easier for young people, including:

- The After Care Guarantee (Europe) – An 'After Care Guarantee' is being piloted in several European countries. Each program ensures that young people leaving care have access to housing, education, as well as employment and training supports. Each young person is provided with an 'aftercare worker' from age 16 to 24 to help ensure young people successfully transition to independent living.
- Barnardo's *Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework* (England) - This framework holds promise for promoting housing stability among care leavers. The model includes five key stages young people will move through: (1) preparing for the reality of the housing options, (2) planning accommodation and support options with youth, (3) reducing housing crisis, (4) accessing housing and support as needed, and (5) accessing and successfully managing independent living and support options.
- First Place for Youth (Oakland, California) – Based on the Housing First model, First Place offers several programs for youth transitioning from care. My First Place, for example, provides housing, education, and employment supports in five Californian communities to young people who have aged out of foster care (ages 18-24). Other First Place programs that support education, wellbeing, and social integration for youth leaving care include Steps to Success, First Foundation, and First Steps Community Centre. A similar adaptation of Housing First has been implemented in Lethbridge, Alberta. Woodgreen also operates a demonstration site in Toronto that offers Housing First for Youth Leaving Care within the intensive research and evaluation project, Making the Shift.
- Staying Put Scotland (Scotland) – The 'Continuing Care' law in Scotland allows young people to remain in care until the age of 21, and provides youth who leave care between the ages of 16 and 21 with access to an 'aftercare package.' This package includes information on suitable accommodations rights, access to education, and additional supports they can take advantage of until the age of 26. Rather than shaping the transition process around age or legal status, Staying Put Scotland is committed to graduated transitions and seeks to meet the individual needs of care leavers.
- Model Reforms to Child Protection (United States) - The American Bar Association has produced examples of laws that can be adapted at the national level to better support young people's transitions from care. Horton-Newell, A., Meyer, K. & Trupin, C. (Eds.). (2010). R*unaway and homeless youth and the law: Model state statutes. American Bar Association Commission on Homelessness and Poverty.*

Many of these models require more than child protection legal reform, but rely on functional partnerships between child welfare services, multiple government agencies and departments, and community-based youth-serving practitioners. In addition to these models and practice examples, research demonstrates that connections to others, reconnection with family, and access to a range of supports can improve housing long-term outcomes for youth exiting care (Kidd et al., 2017; Slesnick et al., 2017).

Youth leaving corrections or immigration detention face enormous difficulty accessing housing, particularly when they lack the support of services or caring adults who can help them navigate the housing market (Wylie, 2014).

Supports for youth leaving corrections and immigration detention

Youth leaving corrections or immigration detention face enormous difficulty accessing housing, particularly when they lack the support of services or caring adults who can help them navigate the housing market (Wylie, 2014). Young people with criminal records often experience difficulty obtaining rental housing (Mendes et al., 2014) and employment (Van der Geest et al., 2016), forcing some youth to return to crime in order to meet their basic needs. As a result, youth leaving corrections are at risk of getting caught in a 'revolving door', cycling between homelessness, reoffending, and re-entering the criminal justice system (Metraux & Culhane, 2006).

Research has identified some strategies that can improve the housing stability of youth transitioning from the criminal justice system, including:

- Reconnecting youth with family and natural supports, which can be facilitated through care management from well-trained professionals (Mares & Jordan, 2012).
- Upon entry into corrections, planning for youths' transitions out (Menon et al., 1995), supported by solid case management while in custody (Nichols et al., 2017).
- Addressing the underlying causes of offending behaviours (e.g., mental health challenges, trauma, family conflict, lack of education or employment) in order to prevent recidivism.
- Effectively coordinating supports and services post-discharge to ensure young people do not 'fall through the cracks' (St. Basils, 2017).

St. Basil's Youth Justice Accommodation Pathway is an excellent example of how a proactive approach to discharge planning can be built into the corrections system. As new interventions and programs for young people leaving corrections are developed and identified, these should build on existing evidence-supported models and programs, such as the Foyer Model, Housing First for Youth, Transitional Housing, Family Reconnect, and employment programs. A by-product of efforts to reduce homelessness among youth leaving corrections may also be reduced crime and improved public safety in Canadian communities.

There has been limited research on how to best stabilize housing for youth transitioning from immigration detention centres, and few models exist in the literature. Future research, advocacy, and practice in this area is critical to ensuring young newcomers are provided with every opportunity to thrive following detention.

Supports for youth leaving healthcare and mental health settings

Youth homelessness has been linked to unsupported transitions from healthcare and mental health settings, including psychiatric wards, hospitals, and rehabilitation centres (Backer, Howard, & Moran, 2007). Remarkably, one study found that amongst adolescents discharged from psychiatric residential treatment, one-third experienced homelessness after discharge (Embry et al., 2000).

Studies indicate that when people are discharged without access to appropriate, affordable housing, the conditions that led them to inpatient care often worsen.

Without housing, young people may be forced to stay in homeless shelters, which are often not equipped or suitable spaces for recovery (Forchuk et al., 2006). While research has demonstrated the efficacy of Critical Time Interventions and transitional housing and supports for adults (Forchuk et al., 2006), there has been limited research on effective models for youth. Future research is needed to determine what models, programs, and interventions can best support youth transitioning from health and mental health institutions.

> *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)*

Preventing Early School Leaving

While transition supports typically concern youth's exits from institutions in which they are *residing* and are responsible for their care (e.g., foster care), we also know that leaving other institutional settings can be difficult as well. Leaving school can be a challenging transition for any young person, and can be especially difficult when school leaving occurs early, is unsupported, or is undesired (e.g., school expulsion).

A pan-Canadian study demonstrated that among youth experiencing homelessness in Canada, 53.2% had dropped out of school, compared to a national average of 9% (Gaetz et al., 2016). This rate is alarming, given that youth who drop out of school have shorter life expectancies (Montez et al., 2012), often experience social exclusion (Liljedahl et al., 2013), and are less likely to secure stable employment (Gaetz et al., 2013). While *Without a Home* revealed that 50.5% of youth experiencing homelessness in Canada are not enrolled in employment, education, or training, 73.9% indicated they would like to return to school one day.

As part of systems prevention, preventing early school leaving should be a priority. The education system should be structured to support and accommodate the enormous challenges some young students face, including housing precarity.

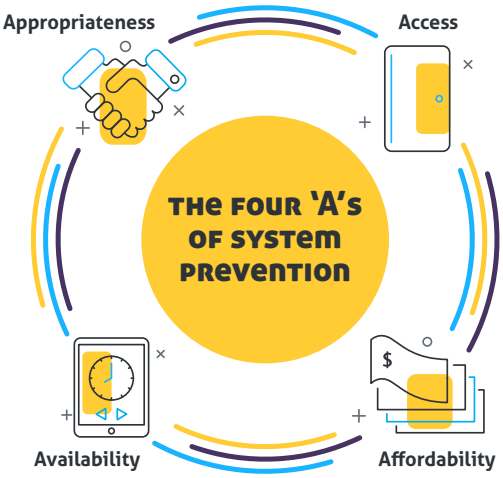
Transition Supports Across Systems – The case for 'zero discharge into homelessness' policies

The goal of all systems should be to adopt 'zero discharge into homelessness' policies across all institutions, agencies, and settings. According to Gaetz and Dej (2016), key elements of all transition supports and transitional planning should include:

- "A robust policy, funding, and operational framework to ensure that all individuals in such institutional contexts have access to reintegration and transitional supports. This is not a targeted homelessness prevention strategy, per se, but rather one that focuses on successful outcomes for those leaving public institutions.
- Reforming systems to take account of changing demographic and economic circumstances. For instance, expanding the age mandate of child protection services and support.
- A statutory requirement that all relevant public institutions identify those at risk of homelessness upon discharge, and ensure that individuals have access to additional services and supports that facilitate social inclusion and access to housing. This requires:
  - Various government ministries and departments to expand their mandate and responsibility beyond their legally required period (for instance, prisons and hospitals do not currently have responsibility for individuals after they are discharged).
  - Collaboration and cooperation between different departments, systems, and sectors to provide supports to individuals at risk of homelessness.
  - Engagement with, and funding for, community-based services to provide transitional case management supports, and in some cases 'aftercare' (e.g., income, social and health supports, system navigation) once individuals and families leave the system." (p. 61-62)

2) Enhancing Youths' Ability to Equitably Access and Benefit from Public Systems, Supports, and Entitlements

A key component of youth homelessness prevention is ensuring that all young people are able to equitably access and benefit from public systems, supports, and entitlements. This can take four primary forms, called "The Four 'A's" of system prevention: availability, access, affordability, and appropriateness.



Availability

Lack of available services and supports contributes to poverty, poorer health outcomes, poorer educational outcomes, and other disadvantages that put some young people and their families at risk of homelessness.

Research and advocates have shown that the *quality* of services and supports not only vary geographically, but some communities have *fewer* supports and services available to them. For example, research has demonstrated that on-reserve child welfare services, education, housing, social services, and healthcare are systematically underfunded and thus less available to residents (Auditor General of Canada, 2018). The National Council of Welfare (2009) has also documented that Indigenous housing is disproportionally substandard and inadequate, in comparison to non-Indigenous housing.

Improving the availability of public supports, services, programs, and entitlements is a critical component of systems prevention. Strategies for increasing the availability of supports include:

- Ensuring equitable funding for on-reserve housing, education, healthcare, social services, and other public services and supports.
- Increasing the availability of low-cost childcare in all communities across Canada.
- Ensuring youth in poor, rural, and remote areas are able to access the same quality of education that is available to youth in wealthier communities.

Access

Access to public supports, services, programs, and entitlements is often a key factor in determining whether a young person will end up on the streets. The What Would it Take? report revealed that many young people *explicitly* link their homelessness to the challenges they faced trying to receive support from public systems (Schwan et al., 2018a).

Key access issues include:

- Lack of knowledge about existing services, supports, or programs;
- Mobility and transportation challenges;
- Lack of accommodations for youth with disabilities or chronic health issues;
- Language barriers;
- Long waitlists, and;
- Discriminatory behaviour on the part of public system professionals.

"We advocate for an increased understanding on the part of service providers and social services in general, that youth will break rules, not always return to curfew, not make it to every appointment set for them, and they will not necessarily abstain from drugs, sex, or crime. This is not because young people are bad and undeserving, but because they have learned to trust and answer only to themselves; in short, because they have had to learn to survive."

Building Bridges: Perspectives on Youth Homelessness from First Nations, Inuit, Metis, Newcomer, and LGBTQ2S+ Youth in Ottawa

Rules, policies, practices, and procedures in public systems can also make it difficult for young people to access supports. Such rules may:

- Prevent youth without ID (e.g., birth certificate, health card) from accessing a service;
- Require that youth follow strict rules in order to access services, supports, or housing;
- Prevent youth from accessing a service because of their age;
- Require that youth abstain from substance use in order to receive services, supports, or housing, or;
- Prevent youth from accessing housing or services because they do not meet a particular qualifying criteria to be considered homeless (e.g., not 'sleeping rough').

Improving access requires a multi-pronged approach in all public systems, built on a rigorous review of how policies and practices create access barriers for some youth and their families.

Good strategies include:

- Providing 'system navigators' for youth and their families.
- Providing low-barrier, community-based health and mental health services, such as *Jigsaw* (Ireland) and *Headspace* (Australia).
- Removing financial barriers for services, such as providing free and timely legal counsel for young people through legal aid clinics or other services.
- Improving outreach and public knowledge about available services and supports, including by positioning information in high-traffic locations.
- Removing 'zero tolerance' policies (e.g., for substance use, theft) in schools, shelters, group homes, and other institutions in which youth are engaged.

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

Vancouver Youth

Affordability

A key challenge for many young people across Canada is the cost of services and supports that would help them stabilize their housing, health, education, or relationships with others. While some communities provide important free services (e.g., system navigation for newcomers, mental healthcare services), these may have long waitlists and/or have prohibitive eligibility criteria. In the absence of these supports, poor families and youth may be forced to choose between paying the rent, purchasing medication, buying mobility devices (e.g., wheelchair), or purchasing food.

People in poverty are often forced to make difficult choices and risk the loss of housing in order to remain in school, meet their healthcare needs, manage a chronic illness or disability, or support a family member.

By making essential services and supports affordable to all people in Canada, public systems can play an important role in poverty reduction and youth homelessness prevention. There are numerous policy levers that can increase affordability include:

- Expanding universal coverage of prescription drugs
- Including sanitary products and products for incontinence under universal healthcare coverage
- Increasing the availability of free mental health services in all Canadian communities, particularly those that are underserved
- Implementing universal childcare across Canada
- Expanding the range of supports, services, and devices covered under provincial/territorial disability support programs

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

Calgary Youth

Appropriateness

While youth and their families may be able to access public services or supports, these supports may not always be *appropriate*. Services or supports do not always adequately account for a youth's needs, unique circumstances or background, developmental stage, or self-identified priorities or goals.

Inappropriate services may be ineffective at decreasing the risk of homelessness for youth, or at worst, can be harmful and cause youth and their families to distrust public systems and professionals.

All public systems should strive towards providing age-appropriate supports that are culturally appropriate and grounded in a commitment to anti-oppression and positive youth development. Research demonstrates a particular need for public systems to offer Indigenous-focused services and supports that are culturally sensitive and embed Indigenous worldviews, Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices, and Indigenous leadership and self-determination at every level. Substantial funding, professional training, and changes to organizational governance structures are needed across all public systems in order to dismantle these colonial practices and provide appropriate services to Indigenous youth and their families.

Similarly, newcomers may experience public system services as insensitive to their cultural, religious, or spiritual beliefs and practices, and some communities may prefer to disengage from these supports as a result. In order to improve equitable access to these supports, public system administrators and professionals must make concerted efforts to work with newcomer communities in redesigning services and supports that will be more welcoming, appropriate, and helpful to newcomers in Canada.

"Its very difficult living in the south, away from home, because a lot of these services that you're accessing, there's no cultural sensitivity. I think that it's important that, you're seeing it more now, that they do hire Inuit to specifically work with the Inuit clients. But when I moved here seven years ago there wasn't anything like that and it made it that much harder."

Young Inuit Woman
[Building Bridges: Perspectives on Youth Homelessness from First Nations, Inuit, Metis, Newcomer, And LGBTQ2S+ Youth in Ottawa]

3) Improving Youths' Experiences & Outcomes in Public Systems

Young people's experiences within public systems, and the outcomes associated with those experiences, influence their risk of homelessness. While stably housed youth may have positive experiences with public systems, many youth experiencing homelessness report repeated negative experiences in the healthcare, criminal justice, education, immigration, and child welfare systems. Research shows that these difficulties often compound over time, harming youth and trapping them in cycles of poverty and marginalization (Nichols & Doberstein, 2016).

This section examines ways to improve youths' experiences and outcomes in public systems. While this work ranges considerably, there are four key areas of action that should be included in this type of systems prevention:

- Tackling discrimination and inequity in public systems;
- Embedding youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination in public systems;
- Effectively preventing and responding to abuse and neglect in public systems, and;
- Addressing silos and gaps within and between government-funded departments and systems, and also within non-profit sectors.

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Tackling discrimination and inequity in public systems

Discrimination and inequity in public systems exist at both the *community level* and the *practice level*. Particular communities experience profound inequities in public service availability and quality (e.g., Wilson & Cardwell, 2012). Discriminatory practices by public systems professionals contribute to the marginalization, exclusion, and poverty of youth as well. There are systems prevention interventions that can address both levels of discrimination and inequity.

At the community level, systems prevention can seek to ensure equal protection of legal and human rights across all communities. These systems changes need to occur alongside measures that prevent discriminatory behaviours and practices within various contexts, such as classrooms, hospitals, and social assistance offices. Research has shown links between housing precarity and discrimination by professionals in healthcare, social services, education, housing,and the immigration system (e.g., Abramovich, 2012; Baskin, 2007; Christiani et al., 2008; Milburn et al., 2010). A key finding of *What Would it Take?* (Schwan et al., 2018a) is that some youth directly attribute their homelessness to the discriminatory behaviour of public systems professionals. Youth focus groups revealed that:

- "Youth were stigmatized by teachers for their mental health issues.
- Youth were kicked out of services because of their sexuality or gender expression.
- Youth were ignored when they said their home or building was unsafe." (p. 8)

PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

One mechanism through which experiences of discrimination can be addressed is through the legal system. Unfortunately, access to legal supports for youth who are poor, marginalized, or homeless remains limited. An innovative example of legal supports for youth who are homeless is Street Youth Legal Services (SYLS), run by Justice for Children and Youth in Toronto, ON. SYLS "provides legal information, advice, referrals and representation to street-involved youth through workshops and individual consultations."

JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

These findings demonstrate the urgent need to identify and dismantle discriminatory and inequitable practices and behaviours within public systems. Steps toward anti-discrimination and equitable service provision include:

- Education, training, resources, and supports on equity, anti-oppression, cultural sensitivity, LGBTQ2S+ allyship, and anti-colonialism for all frontline and managerial staff within public systems serving youth (see Abramovich, 2016; Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012).
- Accountability mechanisms to support anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, solutions- and equity-oriented practices among frontline staff in public systems.
- Safe and accessible pathways through which young people can report discrimination or inequity within any public system.
- Redress mechanisms that are prompt, impartial, equitable, and ultimately account to youth themselves (Schwan et al., 2018a).

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

Vancouver Youth

Embedding youth choice, voice, and self-determination in public systems

Compared to adults, young people often have more limited self-determination within public systems. This is, in part, due to dominant social and cultural beliefs about youths' capacity, maturity, or abilities. In many systems youth are given fewer opportunities to exert personal choice (e.g., when making medical decisions) or are unable to access services or supports without the permission of others (e.g., addiction services that require parental permission).

Some youth, such as youth with disabilities, face particularly strong resistance when they try to assert choices, especially if those choices do not align with system professionals' expectations, assessments, or beliefs. Limiting client choice and self-determination has deep historical roots in social work and other professional practice in Canada. The residential school system, the Sixties Scoop, and ongoing overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in care highlight the violent and systematic suppression of the rights of Indigenous youth.

While many public systems in Canada provide platforms for children and youth to inform policies and practices, youth experiencing homelessness report having limited control over their lives within public systems (Schwan et al., 2018a). For example, youth report few opportunities to:

- Inform what kinds of supports of services they receive, what those supports look like, or the duration of those supports;
- Shape how public system professionals respond to the difficulties they face (e.g., how teachers respond to disclosures of sexual assault);
- Determine where they live, with whom they live, or the kind of housing they live in;
- Control what information is collected about them, or how that information is shared, and;
- Access remedies if their views or experiences are ignored, discounted, or silenced by public system professionals.

"Rights can only be respected, protected, and fulfilled when they are recognized in law, with institutions dedicated to ensuring the accountability of the state – both to the international community and to rights-holders themselves."

Youth Rights, Right Now

Research has shown that a young person's sense of personal control within social service settings directly impacts housing stability (Slesnick et al., 2017).

If we want public systems to contribute to better outcomes for young people, we must respect and protect *youths' right to choose what is best for themselves*, while accounting for their age and developmental stage. To do this, we must tackle the ways in which public systems may silence, marginalize, or criminalize youths' choices. This is part of a commitment to the human rights of all children and youth. One of the core four principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is "respect for the views of the child," with Article 12 assuring "the views of the child be given due weight" in all matters that concern them. As a signatory on the UNCRC, Canada has an obligation to uphold this commitment.

Embedding youth's right to self-determination within public system policies and practices may require a cultural shift within some institutions, as well as the implementation of legislation and policies that ensure public system professionals are accountable to upholding the rights of youth. The Housing First for Youth model (HF4Y) provides an excellent example of how youth choice and voice can be implemented within a public system.

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

Vancouver Youth

Effectively preventing and responding to abuse & neglect in public systems

In addition to histories of family conflict or abuse, youth who are homeless may also experience abuse or neglect *within* public systems.

For example, some studies demonstrate high levels of abuse, violence, and neglect within foster homes and group homes (including sexual violence and sex trafficking) (e.g., Euser et al., 2014; O'Brien et al., 2017; Riebschleger et al., 2015). Research has also shown that youth within the juvenile justice system are often exposed to violence or the risk of violence (Beck et al., 2013; Mendel, 2011).

Youth in these situations may have limited access to alternative housing options, reliable social supports, access to legal advice or representation, and avenues to pursue effective remedies. These experiences may contribute to mental health and addictions challenges, trauma, social exclusion, and disengagement from education and employment – all factors that increase risk of homelessness. Effectively preventing and responding to abuse and neglect in public systems is a critical component of systems prevention.

Strategies that may prevent abuse and neglect within public systems include:

- Improved screening mechanisms to identify and respond to abuse and neglect within foster care homes, group homes, juvenile detention centres, and other facilities or institutions;
- Free and accessible mental health, addictions, and family mediation supports for foster families and carers within the child welfare system (Brown et al., 2007b);
- Training in trauma-informed practices for all frontline workers and carers in the criminal justice and child welfare systems, and;
- Improved legal supports for youth who have been victims of violence, crime, and neglect within public systems (Estrada & Marksamer, 2006).

Further upstream, preventing young people from entering the criminal justice or the child welfare systems in the first place circumvents possible experiences of abuse and neglect within these systems. *Preventing Youth Homelessness: An International Review of Evidence* outlines evidence-based interventions for preventing entry into both systems, as well as research on preventing youth in care from entering the criminal justice system.

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

Vancouver Youth

Conclusion

Research has revealed that public systems, such as healthcare, education, and criminal justice, significantly influence young people's risk of homelessness, both positively and negatively. In consultations with youth across the country, young people felt that "systems change is where youth homelessness prevention efforts could be most effective" (Schwan et al., 2018a, p. 9). This underscores just how critical systems prevention is in a comprehensive approach to youth homelessness prevention. It is time to retool and reimagine public systems as agents of youth homelessness prevention.

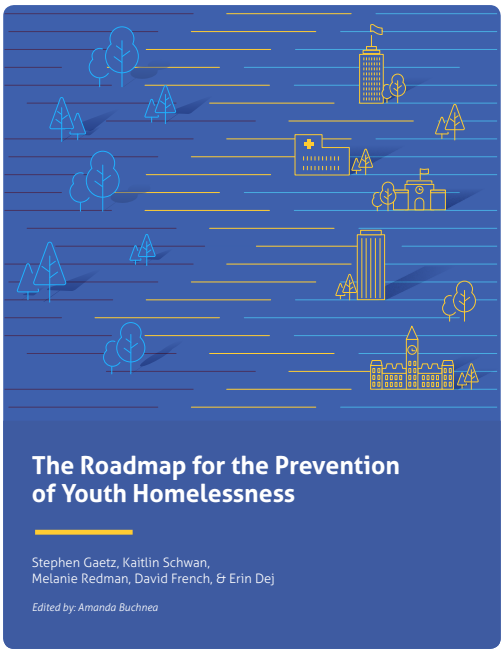
It is time to retool and reimagine public systems as agents of youth homelessness prevention.

Critical to this is dramatically improving young people's experiences within, and transitions out, of public systems. A key finding from *What Would it Take?* (Schwan et al., 2018a) was the frequency with which youth experiencing homelessness felt traumatized, marginalized, stigmatized, and discriminated against in their interactions with public system professionals, including child welfare workers, social workers, teachers, police officers, and others.

We believe youth. We believe also believe systems professionals want to do better. This means that we must provide frontline system staff with the tools, resources, training, and supports to meaningfully support the wellbeing, inclusion, and success of the young people they serve.

With improved understandings of how public systems contribute to or exacerbate youth homelessness, systems can be restructured to work together for youth. Policy silos were designed to provide conceptual and practical ease, efficiency, and clarity for policy development and assigning responsibility. However, in practice, the siloed nature of public governance fails to be person-centred and responsive. Our current approach does not account for the complex policy issues that cut across policy areas. Both public and non-profit service providers are forced to find ad hoc, piecemeal, and often inefficient workarounds to respond to youth falling into homelessness. Systems navigation should not be the responsibility of a young person at-risk of homelessness. It is incumbent upon the public systems to mould and adapt to the needs, rights, and desires of young people. In doing so, young people across the country have a greater chance at sustaining long-term housing stability, wellness, and social inclusion.

Systems 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.*



DOWNLOAD

The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness

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