

# 1 Introduction

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How can you tell if a young person is homeless? Is it the clothes they wear? The way they stand or sit? Where they hang out? Over the past fifteen years, Canadians have become increasingly aware of the existence of youth homelessness in communities large and small. This awareness is shaped by different factors. Some of us will know young people who have become homeless, or we may have personally experienced it ourselves. In other cases, it is our direct encounters that shape our experiences – when we see street youth in parks or other public places, or when a young person sitting on the sidewalk asks us for change.

But for many of us, our understanding of youth homelessness does not come from such direct encounters or experiences at all. In fact, more often we will learn about youth homelessness from secondary sources; through media reports or stories that our friends tell us. Unfortunately, news reports about homeless youth do not provide a comprehensive portrait – we often hear stories of crimes committed by youth, their drug use or involvement in prostitution, or the ‘nuisance’ of panhandling or squeegeeing, for instance.

All of these factors shape how we *think* about youth homelessness; the ways in which we consider the causes, and potentially, the solutions to youth homelessness. We may, for instance, view such youth as victims; their homelessness is the outcome of histories of childhood abuse, or of extreme poverty. This more charitable perspective often underlies our efforts to provide temporary refuge, such

as emergency shelters and day programs. Indeed, over the past twenty years we have seen a steady expansion of government and more often than not, non-profit and community-based emergency services for homeless youth, including shelters, day programs and in some centres specialized health and legal services.

For others, street youth are seen as scary, dangerous and delinquent; as, for instance, petty criminals who threaten pedestrians and car drivers in downtown Toronto, and who chase away tourists. This perspective on youth homelessness can be traced to popular notions of delinquent street urchins from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and underlies a view that such youth are bad (or more generously, ‘troubled’), leave home for fairly insignificant reasons, and get involved in delinquent activities once on the street, thereby putting public health and safety at risk. The problem with this perspective is that it often leads to ‘get tough’ solutions, and the use of law enforcement for what is essentially a social and economic problem.

Others still may see homeless youth as ‘bratty kids’ who don’t like the rules at home, and who are attracted by the lights and the freedom of the city. In this sense, youth homelessness is often explained in terms of broader attitudes we may hold about adolescents – they are moody, make poor decisions, and are rebellious, for example. In other words, their homelessness is more a result of attitudinal and behavioural problems than more serious issues.

These different perspectives are worth considering, since how we think about youth homelessness impacts the way we address the situation. And whether through the development of charitable emergency services or through the heavy handed use of law enforcement, one thing is clear: youth homelessness continues to be a problem that demands solutions.

And, if we are going to solve youth homelessness in a meaningful way, we need to develop approaches that are informed by research. This book has been written with this in mind. In this volume, leading Canadian scholars present key findings from their research on youth homelessness. In an effort to make this research accessible, as well as relevant to decision-makers and practitioners, contributing authors have been asked to address the ‘so whatness’ of their research; what are the policy and practice implications of this research and what can it tell those who are working to address youth homelessness?

As we move forward, we need to develop more effective solutions, so that young people who are homeless (or at risk of homelessness) are provided with the kinds of supports and opportunities that any young person needs; supports that are nurturing, respectful and provide them with the building blocks to live healthy, fulfilling and productive lives. To this end, research has a role to play.

## About Youth Homelessness

One of the main goals of this volume is to enhance our understanding of youth homelessness. Let's start with a few questions: do we really need a separate category of 'homelessness' for young people? Isn't the experience of homelessness, whether you are an adult or a young person, about the same set of issues – a lack of housing and appropriate supports? While there are some aspects of homelessness that are common to all who experience it, there are significant differences that need to be taken into account, both from a research perspective, and in terms of how we respond to the issue. A key distinction that frames our understanding of youth homelessness is that young people generally are fleeing from – or kicked out of – households where they have been dependent upon adult caregivers. So, youth homelessness is experienced not only as the loss of housing, but also entails ruptured relations with family, and potentially the loss of friends, other supportive adults, and community. It can mean premature withdrawal from school and an early rush towards independence at a time when these youth may be suffering from the trauma of such losses.

This means that while many, if not most, adults who are homeless will have had some experience with independent living this is not the case for most homeless youth. Few leave home with knowledge of how to rent and maintain an apartment, find a job (especially one that isn't a dead-end, minimum wage job), stay in school, buy and prepare food, pay bills and even arrange medical appointments. On top of all this, many if not most young people who become homeless are working through the challenges of adolescent development, including physical, cognitive and identity development. This includes efforts to develop meaningful relationships, engage in fulfilling activities and figure out exactly what they want to do with their lives. We understand that for most young people this can be a slow and arduous process, lasting years. For those who become homeless, however, there is usually no time or the necessary supports in place to allow this development to occur in a safe and supported way. Many of us cannot fathom the idea of being on the street at such a young age without any supports to guide their way into safe and supportive environments. So, our understanding of youth homelessness must necessarily be framed in terms of the challenges of adolescence and young adulthood.

If we step back a bit, it is also important to note that the causes of youth homelessness are also somewhat distinct from those that produce adult homelessness. The key causes of youth homelessness are as follows:

### a) Individual/Relational Factors

We know well from research that difficult and challenging family situations and

relationships underlie most youth homelessness (Karabanow, 2004; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Braitstein et al., 2003; Caputo et al., 1996; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Janus et al., 1995). More significantly, there is extensive research in Canada and the United States that demonstrates that a significant percentage of homeless youth – between 60 and 70 percent – leave family environments where they have experienced interpersonal violence, including physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse (Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Karabanow, 2004; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Van den Bree et al., 2009). Additionally, parental neglect and exposure to domestic violence (not directly involving the youth), as well as parental psychiatric disorders (Andres-Lemay et al., 2005) and addictions (McMorris et al., 2002) can also be factors.

In these cases, the problems young people experience are a direct result of the context they are in, rather than a result of their own personal challenges. However, in some cases the strains within the family may also stem from the challenges young people themselves are facing, including their own substance use, depression, sexual orientation, learning disabilities, etc. These factors, in some cases combined with a challenging family environment and structural context may produce secondary factors that increase strain, including educational failure or disengagement, or involvement with crime (Karabanow, 2004). The individual and relational causes of youth homelessness, then, are often very difficult to disentangle, and reflect the challenges that many families face in coping with such stress (Mallet et al., 2005).

## **b) Structural Factors**

Here we are not so much referring to individual or family problems, but rather broader systemic, social and economic factors that may lead to homelessness. Poverty, lack of food and inadequate housing may lead young people to leave home, either of their own choice or because their families can no longer support them. A lack of affordable housing and shifts in the economy mean that many young people who do leave home will not be able to generate sufficient income to obtain and maintain housing, and in a competitive housing market, may face age-based discrimination. A lack of access to adequate education – and in some cases necessary supports for those with disabilities, inadequate nutrition, etc. may undermine school success and lead to educational disengagement.

Discrimination is an additional structural factor that contributes to youth homelessness. Racism restricts people's opportunities, can impact on schooling and makes the transition to independent living that much more difficult. We know from Canadian research that Aboriginal and black youth are over-represented in the youth homeless population. Homophobia is also implicated in youth homelessness, demonstrated by the fact that young people who are sexual minorities

are clearly overrepresented in the street youth population (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2009; Abramovich, this volume). The experience of discrimination (exacerbated when combined with poverty) can contribute to school disengagement and failure, drug misuse, mental health issues, criminality and gang involvement.

### c) Institutional and Systems Failures

One factor that most clearly defines the experience of youth homelessness is the failure of other systems of care and support, including child protection, health, mental health care and corrections. Inadequate supports for young people in child protection – including effective supports for transitions from care – mean that many young people are essentially discharged into homelessness (Nichols, this volume; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2012; Serge et al., 2002). Several Canadian studies demonstrate that between 40 and 50 percent of homeless youth have a history of foster care or group homes involvement that has been described as exploitative, uncaring, unsupportive and even abusive (Nichols, this volume; Karabanow, 2004; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Gaetz, 2002; Gaetz et al., 2010; Lemon Osterling et al., 2006; Raising the Roof, 2009; Serge et al., 2002). Discharge from corrections without adequate planning and post-release support also contributes to youth homelessness. We know that more than half of Canadian young people who are homeless have been in jail, a youth detention centre, or prison (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Finally, one needs to consider that in many communities – large and small – there are inadequate supports for young people experiencing mental health problems. The Canadian Mental Health Association estimates that between 10-20% of young people are affected by a mental illness or disorder<sup>1</sup>, with some particularly challenging mental health issues, such as schizophrenia, often first appearing during the teen years. Mental health problems are even more acute amongst the homeless youth population (Kidd, this volume; McCay, this volume). In some cases young people are discharged from health care facilities, without adequate follow up supports, or even a home to go to. Once on the streets, the lack of support is often worse because young people lack family support, financial support and the knowledge to navigate systems.

When thinking about youth homelessness, including the causes discussed above, it is also important to consider the diversity within the population. This diversity is understood in terms of age differences and levels of maturity, gender and sexual orientation, the experience of racism, family connectedness and prior experiences of abuse. For instance, developmentally, there is a huge difference between the needs and capabilities of a 14 year old versus someone in their early twenties. A considerable body of research on youth homelessness in Canada

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1. [www.cmha.ca/media/fast-facts-about-mental-illness/](http://www.cmha.ca/media/fast-facts-about-mental-illness/)

shows that there are typically two males on the streets for every female (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; 2009). This means that gender must be considered as a pathway to the streets, but also in terms of how homelessness is experienced. In addition, some ethno-racial populations tend to be overrepresented – most significantly, Aboriginal (Baskin, this volume) and black youth (Springer et al., 2006; Springer, this volume). A significant percentage of homeless youth report being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (Abramovich, this volume; Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2009), which again points to the degree to which homophobia contributes to homelessness, and may continue once young people are on the streets. The diverse background experiences of young people must also be taken into account. Research in Canada and elsewhere highlights that young people with significant backgrounds of abuse and violence are not only more likely to become homeless, but also face more challenges in moving off the streets (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Rew, 2002; Whitbeck et al., 1999). Some homeless youth experience mental health problems and/or addictions, while others do not.

The causes and conditions of youth homelessness, then, are quite diverse and complex. The reality is that each young person's story is different, and will involve a range of factors, some of which are structural, some which may be the result of systems failures, and some which stem from family problems and conflicts. There is more to youth homelessness than the popular but misguided view that young people leave home because they are simply rebellious teens who don't like doing the dishes. For young people who leave home for more frivolous reasons, a few weeks spent on the streets going hungry, lacking sleep, feeling unsafe, and wearing the same pair of socks, will likely make home look a lot more attractive. The vast majority of homeless youth have left traumatic environments and are searching for belonging and acceptance (Karabanow et al., 2010).

The point of all of this, then, is that youth homelessness is different from adult homelessness. The causes of homelessness are unique, as are the experiences of young people once on the streets. All of this suggests that solutions and pathways off the streets must also reflect a clear understanding of the unique conditions and circumstances of youth homelessness. What is significant to remember is that we should view this population first and foremost as young people who are trying to survive without the supports that many of us take for granted.

## **A Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness**

The distinctiveness of youth homelessness also suggests the need for a definition that more clearly frames exactly who we are talking about. Recently, the Canadian Homelessness Research Network, with endorsements from researchers and communities across the country, established a broad, pan-Canadian definition of

homelessness (CDH). This definition does not attempt to characterize specific sub-populations, but more generally helps define the experience of homelessness:

*Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, stressful and distressing (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012:1).*

The CDH also lays out a typology that describes different degrees of homelessness and housing insecurity, including:

1) **Unsheltered**, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation; 2) **Emergency Sheltered**, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence; 3) **Provisionally Accommodated**, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure, and finally, 4) **At Risk of Homelessness**, referring to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012:1).

Because, as we have argued, the experience of homelessness amongst youth is distinct from adults, there is also the need for a more specific, youth-focused definition. In a forthcoming Homeless Hub Report: *Coming of Age – Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada*, youth homelessness is defined as including:

*youth aged 13 to 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers and importantly lack many of the social supports that we typically deem necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood. In such circumstances, young people do not have a stable or consistent source of income or place of residence, nor do they necessarily have adequate access to support networks to foster a safe and nurturing transition into the responsibilities of adulthood (Gaetz, forthcoming).*

In addition to this definition, it is worth considering a typology that helps us make sense of some key differences within the population. A typology developed by the National Alliance to End Homelessness<sup>2</sup> addresses diversity in

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2. The National Alliance to End Homelessness typology draws from considerable research on frequency and duration of homelessness (see Kuhn & Culhane, 1998), and more recently, a review of typologies of youth homelessness put forward by Toro et al., 2011.

terms of the causes and experiences of homelessness, and also helps us to map the duration and frequency of homelessness amongst youth. This is important from the perspective of interventions, because it helps us identify levels of need, existing informal supports, and risk of becoming chronically homeless. The typology, drawn from the *Coming of Age* report, includes three categories:

***Temporarily Disconnected*** – For the vast majority of young people who become homeless, it is a short-term experience. Toro et al., (2011) identify this population as generally younger, and having more stable or redeemable relations with family members, and are more likely to remain in school. For this population, there is a strong need for prevention and early intervention to divert young people from the homelessness system.

***Unstably Connected*** – This population of homeless youth has a more complicated housing history, and is likely to have longer and repeated episodes of homelessness. They are more likely to be disengaged from school, and will have challenges obtaining and maintaining employment. Most will have retained some level of connection with family members, and are less likely to experience serious mental health or addictions issues compared to chronically homeless youth.

***Chronically Disconnected*** – In terms of numbers, this will be the smallest group of homeless youth, but at the same time the group with the most complex needs, and the users of the most resources in the youth homelessness sector. This group of young people will experience long term homelessness, repeated episodes, and will more likely have mental health and/or addictions issues. They will have the most unstable relations with their families, and in some cases there will be no connections at all (Gaetz, forthcoming).

This typology can become a useful tool for communities seeking to understand, define and enumerate the shape and scope of the youth homelessness problem. It can also provide some insight into the kinds of interventions needed to address youth homelessness, as one size definitely does not fit all.

## About This Book

This volume is intended to highlight the best of Canadian research on youth homelessness. The book is organized in a thematic way, so that there are separate sections relating to: 1) pathways in and out of homelessness; 2) housing; 3) health; 4) mental health and addictions; 5) employment, education



and training; 6) legal and justice issues; and 7) diversity and subpopulations. Each chapter is accompanied by a short, plain language summary that captures the key themes. In addition, some sections include 'promising practice' summaries of effective program responses from communities across Canada. Below is a brief overview of the chapters included in this book.

The first section of the book explores pathways in and out of homelessness, which, as we have argued in this introduction, are somewhat unique for youth. Chapters in this section focus on family relations in the lives of young people and the potential for reconnecting with family and community (Winland, this volume), the strategies that young people engage in, and the challenges they face in transitioning off the streets and in obtaining stability (Karabanow & Naylor, this volume), an in-depth exploration of the multiple childhood stresses faced by young people who become homeless in a rural area in southern Ontario (Baker Collins, this volume), and how child welfare policy, practice, and legislation shape young people's experiences of homelessness and efforts to secure housing, make money, finish school, and engage in relationships with others (Nichols, this volume).

Section two includes several chapters that focus on accommodation and supports for young people. The first chapter presents preliminary findings from an important study on Housing First and youth homelessness that focuses on which models of accommodation and supports work best for young people with mental health and addictions problems (Forchuk et al., this volume) and is followed by a chapter that describes a supportive housing model for young mothers in Nova Scotia (Karabanow & Hughes, this volume).

Homelessness of course involves more than a lack of housing. Health issues are central to the experience of homelessness. Chapters in this section focus on nutritional vulnerability and community food assistance programs for youth (Dachner & Tarasuk, this volume), how experiences of sexual exploitation impact on the health and well-being of homeless youth (Saewyc et al., this volume), and strategies for promoting health for homeless and street involved youth (Worthington & MacLaurin, this volume). Because mental health and addictions issues are a central concern for many of those who work directly with street youth, we have included a number of chapters that deal with these issues. Such chapters focus on the need for harm reduction approaches for youth with substance use and mental health problems (Kirst & Erickson, this volume), an exploration of substance use and a determination of when such use becomes harmful (Buccieri, this volume), a critical review of mental health and youth homelessness (Kidd, this volume), and the need for early mental health intervention to strengthen resilience in street-involved youth (McCay & Aiello, this volume).

In making a successful transition to adulthood, one of the key challenges for all young people is navigating the road from education to employment. In answering the question, “why don’t street youth just get a job?” the factors that enhance – and undermine employability – are explored (Gaetz & O’Grady, this volume). Other chapters examine the factors that promote school attendance amongst homeless youth (Liljedahl et al., this volume) and the role of private sector engagement in enhancing the employment opportunities of homeless youth (Noble & Oseni, this volume). This section concludes with two promising practice case studies of innovative training and employment programs, including Bladerunners (Vancouver, BC) and Train for Trades (St. John’s, Newfoundland).

Young people who are homeless are often framed as criminals, even though there is considerable research that attests to the fact that they are more likely to be victims of crime (O’Grady et al., this volume). Chapters in this section focus on the criminalization and policing of youth homelessness (O’Grady et al., this volume), why street youth become involved in crime (Baron, this volume) and the legal, social and moral regulation of homeless youth (Sommers, this volume).

One cannot truly understand youth homelessness without a consideration of diversity. Several chapters of this book focus on sub-populations, including the complex needs of LGBTQ youth (Abramovich, this volume), the ongoing homelessness crisis within Indigenous populations in Toronto and their past and present involvement with the child welfare system (Baskin, this volume), the role of space, place, and gender in the lives of ten homeless youth (Buccieri, this volume), and the racialized dimensions of youth homelessness in Toronto, particularly among Caribbean youth (Springer et al., this volume).

The book concludes by reviewing a framework for ending youth homelessness in Canada (Gaetz, this volume). Pulling together what has been learned about the conditions of youth homelessness and key interventions, this chapter lays out a way to address homelessness that shifts the focus from an emergency response (shelters, day programs and policing) to one that emphasizes prevention, on one hand, and accommodation and supports, on the other. This paradigm shift is accomplished through a strategic planning framework that focuses on the needs of adolescents and young adults, and builds a ‘system of care’ to ensure young people receive the supports they need while spending as little time in emergency shelters as possible.

We *can* solve youth homelessness. To get there, we need to apply what we know and what we have learned. Research can and should play a vital role in generating and informing solutions to homelessness by addressing key

questions and providing solid evidence for policy makers and practitioners. This volume is intended to help us develop and move forward with real and sustainable solutions to youth homelessness.

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