

4 Childhood Stress and Mobility Among Rural Homeless Youth

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Introduction

Our mental image of homeless youth tends to be one of youth living on the street in a large urban setting. Most research on homeless youth in Canada takes place in cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary and Halifax. But youth become homeless in small towns and rural locations as well. This chapter reports on a longitudinal study (observation of a sample of youth over a period of time) of 40 homeless youth in the region of Niagara, a mix of rural, small town and urban geography.

The limited information on rural youth homelessness in Canada suggests there are unique issues that affect youth in rural settings (Elias, 2009; Skott-Myrhe et al., 2008; Transitions Committee, 2003; Voakes, 1991). Services are less accessible, since they tend to be centralized in nearby urban areas (Beer et al., 2003; Edwards et al., 2009; Elias, 2009; Skott-Myrhe et al., 2008; Transitions Committee, 2003), and when youth leave a rural area to obtain services, they leave behind social networks and emotional connection to a place (Beer et al., 2003; Elias, 2009). There are fewer housing options available for homeless youth in rural areas (Beer et al., 2003; Edwards et al., 2009; Skott-Myrhe et al., 2008) and so youth take up camping, couch surfing, and living in barns, abandoned farmhouses, or cars (Edwards et al., 2009; Elias, 2009; and Transitions Committee, 2003). As a consequence, they move around frequently (Transitions Committee, 2003).

In order to find out more about the nature of youth homelessness in Niagara, particularly its causes and impacts, forty homeless youth were followed over a period of six to twelve months. This study targeted youth in four separate districts of Niagara to see whether youth homelessness differed depending on geographic location. The goal of the study was to use the increased knowledge of the causes and impacts of youth homelessness to develop policies and programs that better meet the needs of homeless youth.

In this chapter, the multiple childhood stresses (parental conflict, physical/sexual abuse, alcohol and/or drug abuse, for instance) and mobility (movement) of this population will be explored in detail. In doing so, an argument will be made that understanding the causes of youth homelessness, such as childhood trauma, is insufficient if we do not also help youth heal from the impact of such serious trauma. Emergency responses are insufficient if we do not also provide adequate long-term support to help youth put their lives back together again. The findings of this study will be placed in the context of the literature on causes of youth homelessness in Canada, and recommendations will be made for more comprehensive programs for homeless youth.

Literature Review

For this literature review, a detailed examination of studies of youth homelessness in Canada was undertaken, including national reviews and municipal reports (Calgary, Halifax, Hamilton, Lanark County, Ottawa, St. John's, Toronto, Victoria, Waterloo, and Winnipeg). These studies were reviewed not only for their descriptions of homeless youth, but also to examine how the complex lives of individual homeless youth are captured in reports on homeless youth populations as a whole. In addition, given the significance of mobility (moving from one place to another) among the youth in this study, persistent homelessness and residential instability (instability in the place of primary residence before homelessness) among homeless youth in Canada are also examined.

Causes of Youth Homelessness

The challenge of describing the complexity of homelessness is widely recognized. One of the challenges identified is the problem of capturing both structural barriers that contribute to and maintain homelessness, and individual factors such as substance abuse and mental health issues that are more widespread among homeless populations (Anucha, 2005; Chamberlain & McKenzie, 2004). Gaetz (forthcoming) identifies three primary causes of youth homelessness: *individual/relational* factors including family conflict, violence, abuse and substance abuse; *structural factors* including the lack of af-

fordable housing, unemployment, discrimination and inadequate education; and *systems failures* where systems outside the homelessness sector fail youth, including the child welfare, mental health, and criminal justice systems.

Research into the causes of youth homelessness is now well developed. Karabanow states that, “The literature has provided an impressive grasp on the causes and consequences of street life including family dysfunction, abuse and trauma, exploitation and alienation, poverty, addiction, and mental health and child welfare inadequacies...” (2009:1). The reports on homeless youth reviewed for this study demonstrate high rates of abuse, family conflict and substance abuse, as well as involvement with the child protection and criminal justice systems. Reports on youth homelessness generally take the form of a jarringly familiar list of common issues.

In order to arrive at this list, researchers break down individual lives into a series of characteristics (for instance, the experience of child abuse or substance abuse), the frequencies of which are then reported numerically as a total percentage for the group of youth being studied. An individual youth may have grown up in a home filled with conflict, suffered child abuse, experienced his or her parents’ divorce and been sent back and forth between both parents until being kicked out onto the streets. In final reporting, this experience is reflected in a list of numbers: this percentage of youth experienced family conflict, this percentage experienced abuse, and this percentage of youth was evicted by parents. Most of the Canadian studies reviewed for this article report on the causes of youth homelessness as a list of percentages (DeSantis, 2002; Evenson & Barr, 2009; Klodawsky et al., 2006; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Transitions Committee, 2003; Vengris, 2005; Wingert et al., 2005). While these lists tell us something important about the population of homeless youth in Canada, in generalizing the experiences of homeless youth, the increasing impact of multiple stresses on individual lives can be lost.

Some reports on youth homelessness do refer to the snowballing nature of stresses by reporting on the “complexity” of factors that work together to contribute to youth homelessness, and thus recognize that these factors pile up for individual youth (Koeller, 2008; PHAC, 2006; Wingert et al., 2005). McLean (2005) refers to the cumulative impact of multiple stressors and suggests that multiple stressors increase the likelihood of homelessness. Several reports suggest that the traumatic events, which occur early in the lives of youth, have an impact long after the event and can lead to later homelessness (Social Planning, Policy and Program Administration, 2007; PHAC, 2006).

Another way in which the complexity of youth homelessness is addressed is in moving beyond a “point in time” picture (i.e. where a youth was living, what a youth was doing at a particular time on a particular day) to recognizing pathways over time (Chamberlain & McKenzie, 2004; Karabanow, 2009; Staller, 2004). In a study that examined the housing history of 149 youth staying at Covenant House in Toronto, Janus et al., (1987) mapped out the pathways of runaway homeless youth and found that they cycle between family, institutions (group homes, foster care, custody), shelters (formal and informal), and the street.

Benoit et al., (2008) conducted a study of the major transitions during the life histories of street youth as compared to a random sample of adolescent youth in Victoria. They found that street youth had considerable disruption in their early years, had less supportive relationships with their parents and had parents with lower education and weak ties to employment. The authors concluded that street youth make the transition between adolescence and adulthood with a lack of social support and financial resources.

These studies found that youth are forced to take on adult responsibilities too early, without family and social supports (Benoit et al., 2008; Janus et al., 1987). The typical situation of adolescents in our culture (full time school attendance, living with parents, and financial dependence on parents) is traded for no longer being in school, insecure housing, no financial support from parents, early romantic relationships and risky behaviours (unprotected sex, drug use, etc.).

In a third study of the life histories of homeless youth, Di Paolo (1999) focused on the impact of multiple traumas¹ in the lives of youth. DiPaolo looked for links between past trauma and current functioning in a population of homeless youth, comparing those who had experienced trauma with those who had not. The multiple traumas he examined were child sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse (damage to a child’s functioning brought about by neglect or maltreatment), exposure to domestic violence, and exposure to neighbourhood violence. DiPaolo found that all five types of trauma were associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and that the level of psychopathology (mental illness and depression) among youth increased as the frequency and severity of each type of trauma increased.

Karabanow (2009) looked at pathways for homeless youth and found that neither the path to the streets nor the path off the streets moves in a straight line. Factors that pushed youth to the streets included chaotic, disruptive and inconsistent home lives, as well as uncaring, exploitive and unstable foster care placements. For

1. This study took place in California, not Canada, but it is instructive, particularly on the impact of trauma.

youth, the streets were seen as a safer and more accepting space than their homes. Karabanow outlines the six stages youth travel through to successfully exit street life, including thinking about exiting, having the courage to change, getting help, transitioning from street life to housing, changing routines and finally a successful exit. There were numerous obstacles at each stage of getting off the street and youth usually made several attempts before a successful exit.

Persistent Homelessness and Residential Instability

Persistent youth homelessness is measured in different ways, such as the number of times a youth has been homeless, episodic homelessness (i.e. rotating in and out of homelessness), duration of homelessness, and the percentage of homeless youth living on the street. In several studies, the percentage of youth with multiple episodes of homelessness (from three to five) ranged from about one third of homeless youth in Calgary (McLean, 2005) and Ottawa (Klodawsky et al., 2006), to 38.6% in Lanark County (Transitions Committee, 2003). With regard to street life, reports from Halifax (Koeller, 2008) and Waterloo (DeSantis, 2002) reported that half of homeless youth had lived on the streets, while a national survey found that over 60% of homeless youth had lived on the streets full-time at some point (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). In terms of duration, across the cities of Calgary, Toronto and St. John's, 68% of street-involved youth were found to have participated in street life for more than a year and up to five years (Evenson & Barr, 2009). A report on street youth in Winnipeg found that an increasing number of youth are chronically or regularly homeless (Wingert et al., 2005).

Youth are also found to have patterns of disruption and residential instability prior to becoming homeless. Karabanow (2009:4) describes this pattern of disruption as follows, "family instability, including numerous transitions and moves (i.e., divorce, separation, introduction of stepparents and stepchildren, moving homes, changing cities, and shifting living arrangements)." In their review of research on homeless youth, Robertson and Toro (1999) reported that homelessness among youth was part of a long pattern of residential instability including repeated moves. In a research scan of homeless youth in three Canadian cities (Calgary, Toronto and St. John's), Evenson and Barr (2009) found that 63% of youth across the cities had grown up in a family that found it hard to maintain housing. Benoit et al., (2008) found a dramatic difference in residency patterns between a group of homeless youth and a randomly selected sample of youth from the same geographic area. By age 13, only one quarter of homeless youth were living in the same family situation into which they were born (i.e., with the same family members), while 60% of a comparable group of housed youth were living in the same family situation. In Lanark County (Transitions Committee, 2003), a geographic area comparable to Niagara, youth who had experienced

episodes of homelessness were also transient (or temporary) in terms of residence, with 77% of youth having lived in their current residence for less than three months and 70% having lived in their previous residence less than a year.

The studies above demonstrate that examining youth homelessness over time reveals the risks of living on the street and the complex paths that homeless youth follow when seeking stable housing. In addition, the experiences of homeless youth before, during and after periods of homelessness are marked by residential instability, trauma at home and in the child welfare system, with added trauma experienced while on the streets. There are lasting impacts of this trauma including depression, post traumatic stress disorder and more severe mental illness. These findings demonstrate the importance of looking beyond the immediate causes of youth homelessness in understanding the needs of youth and looking beyond emergency shelter in program and policy responses to youth homelessness.

Homeless Youth in Niagara

The Project

This research project, which studied homeless youth in Niagara, had three goals. The first was to understand the causes and impacts of homelessness, the second was to look for differences in causes and impacts among homeless youth depending on their geographic location in Niagara, and the third was to use the increased knowledge to develop programs that better meet the needs of homeless youth.

Youth were recruited for the study at youth shelters, youth drop-in centres, and through youth outreach workers and community agencies. Youth were eligible for the study if they were between 16 and 25 years of age, had been homeless² during the previous year and had first become homeless as teens. In order to investigate differences among homeless youth based on their location in rural or urban settings, ten youth were targeted in each of four districts of the Region of Niagara: Fort Erie/Port Colborne in the south, Niagara Falls/Welland in the middle, St. Catharines in the north, and West Niagara.

The initial interviews with 40 youth began in the spring of 2009 and the last interviews were conducted in early 2010. The design of the study was to conduct two follow-up interviews at three months and at six months to see whether youth had achieved housing stability. The mobility or movement of the youth during the study resulted in longer time periods between interviews. Thirty of the youth

2. Homeless was defined as living on the street, living in unsuitable accommodation such as an abandoned home/car/shed, living in emergency shelter or couch-surfing.

were interviewed a second time, with an average of four months between first and second interview. Fifteen youth were located for a third interview, with an average time of ten months after the first interview. Youth were followed through contact information obtained at the first interview, through Facebook connections and with the help of agency staff at youth drop-in centres and shelters. The longitudinal nature of the study (following youth over time) provided important information on the difficulty of making the transition from homelessness to stable housing.

Project Setting

The Niagara Region extends from Lake Ontario in the north to Lake Erie in the south and is bounded on the east by the Niagara River and on the west by a boundary line that travels primarily through rural farmland. The region is divided geographically into 12 municipalities. Municipal boundaries were established when regional government was instituted and they are administrative boundaries that incorporate geographic areas larger than the built up urban area which gives the municipality its name³. There is one city with a population of 132,000 (St. Catharines), one of 80,000 (Niagara Falls) and one of 50,000 (Welland). The other municipalities all have populations of less than 30,000. The western area is primarily rural and the south is primarily small towns. The Niagara Region presents a combination of urban areas, some small towns and areas that are primarily rural farmland.

There are two shelters, one in Niagara Falls and one in St. Catharines, which serve homeless youth aged 16 to 24. There is a youth drop-in centre in Grimsby in West Niagara that is open in the late afternoon and early evening. There are adult shelters in St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, and Welland that house homeless youth, though there are no youth-specific services available in those shelters. There are also outreach services provided throughout the region to help youth connect to local services, particularly in areas in the south and west, where there are neither youth nor adult shelters.

Data Collection and Analysis

Youth were asked questions⁴ about demographics (age, gender, etc.), education, employment, income, parents' employment and income, social support,

3. The 2006 census definition of an urban area refers to an area with a population of at least 1000 and no fewer than 400 persons per square kilometre. Although all of the municipalities in Niagara have a population above 1000, most have a density of less than 400 persons per square kilometre.

4. Survey questions were based on instruments used in other homelessness studies (Aubry et al., 2007; Gardiner & Cairns, 2002; Sergeet al., 2002; Springer et al., 2006).

childhood stressors, current and past housing situations, services, and future dreams⁵. Follow-up questionnaires included a brief history of events since the last interview, current housing situation, school attendance, employment, income, social support, and connection to services. Ethical approval for the questionnaires, recruitment and interview processes, and consent forms was obtained from York University. Research procedures were developed using the Guidelines for Conducting Research with People who are Homeless (2008). Participants received an honorarium (payment) for each interview.

Quantitative (numerical) data from the questionnaires was entered into an SPSS data base for analysis and qualitative (narrative) data were coded by common themes. In addition, a research assistant worked with transcripts from the youth interviews to put together a narrative history for each youth that tracked their childhood experiences, periods of homelessness and movement during the study. The narrative was helpful since the history of each youth tended to be scattered throughout the responses to interview questions in unconnected ways.

Demographic Profile

The average age of youth when interviewed was 18. Seventeen of the youth were female and 23 were male. The majority of the youth, 35 out of 40 or 88%, were born in Canada. Of the five youth born elsewhere, two had lived in Canada since they were very young and three had lived in Canada for several years. Thirty-five youth described their race/ethnicity as Caucasian, one as African Canadian, one as Jamaican and three as Aboriginal. In terms of financial status, the largest group of youth (42%) reported their childhood financial situation as average, 21% as above average or wealthy and 37% as below average or poor.

Findings⁶

It will be clear from the findings that most youth in this study experienced lives filled with family conflict, parental substance abuse, unstable housing situations and mobility (frequent moves including cycling between homelessness, youth shelters, couch surfing and rental housing). The focus of the findings section will be to examine these familiar characteristics in the context of the complexity of the lives of individual youth. In compiling a narrative history for each youth in the study it became clear that these stresses were there, sometimes for years, before

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5. Survey instruments included an initial youth questionnaire and a follow-up youth questionnaire.
 6. Many important findings from this study cannot be discussed in this article due to space limitations. The community report summarizing the study, *Sofas, Shelters and Strangers*, is available online at the homelesshub.ca.

youth became homeless and for most, these same stresses continued after they found housing. The following discussion will focus on the mobility or movement of youth before and during the study, the snowball impact of multiple childhood stresses and the inadequacy of emergency responses to address these issues.

Mobility Before, During and After Homelessness

The following discussion will include a summary of several measures of mobility among the youth in the study including lifetime mobility, mobility during the study and rural youth mobility. Information on mobility was drawn from questions about current housing situations in both the first and follow-up interviews, questions about past housing situations, previous experiences of homelessness, most recent permanent address, as well as a question about who youth lived with while growing up.

Mobility During the Niagara Study

Information on the mobility of youth during the study was drawn from follow-up interviews, which asked about the current housing situation, the housing situation immediately prior to the current one and a general question about what had happened since the last interview. Mobility patterns during the study are available for the 15 youth who were located for a third interview. In addition, there is information about the housing situation of six other youth who were not located for a third interview, either from the youth themselves when trying to set up an interview or from shelter staff who knew of their housing circumstances. The housing situation of these 21 youth over the course of the study is outlined below.

Only three youth were in the same housing situation for all three interviews. An additional two youth were housed at the time of the second interview and remained housed in the same situation at time three. Eight youth were housed at time three though they were not housed at time two or were in a different housing situation. Eight youth were in temporary housing situations at time three, which included primarily couch surfing, with one youth in a shelter, one with grandparents and another in custody. Some youth moved from homelessness to rental situations during the course of the study, other youth moved from rental situations back into homelessness and a few managed to do both.

Table 1

Youth housing situation over the course of the study			
Youth ID	Time One	Time Two	Time Three
1	Renting	In custody	In custody again after renting for a bit
3	Shelter	Transitional housing	Same transitional housing
4	Shelter	Different shelter	Same shelter as time two
6	Abandoned house	Renting	Different rental
7	Shelter	Shelter	Renting
8	Renting	Same rental	Same rental
9	Couch surfing	Renting	Different rental
10	Couch surfing	With mother	Couch surfing
11	Couch surfing	Motel	Couch surfing
15	Renting	Couch surfing	Renting
17	Renting	Same rental	Same rental
18	Couch surfing	Couch surfing	Renting
24	Shelter	Renting	Rooming house after some time in custody
27	Shelter	Rooming house	Renting in another city
28	Renting	Same rental	Same rental
29	Renting	Boarding with family	Grandparents
30	Shelter	Renting a room	Couch surfing
31	Shelter	Transitional housing	Transitional housing
32	With father	Couch surfing	Renting
35	Renting	Same rental	Couch surfing
37	Motel	Renting	Couch surfing

Another measure of youth mobility over the course of the study was to count the number of times youth moved between the first and follow up interviews (see Table 2). These are conservative estimates since some youth were not able to recall each instance in a series of couch surfing arrangements. Youth moved an average of three times during the study, with three youth having no moves on one end of the continuum and seven youth moving more than seven times. (In the findings and discussion section of this chapter a critique will be made of the tendency of reports on homeless youth to present findings in a generalized fashion, obscuring the complexity of individual lives and the cumulative impact of multiple stresses. Averages are being used here to illuminate the individual mobility of the youth in this study as reported in Table 1 and the specific challenges faced by youth in rural areas.).

Table 2

Average number of moves during the study	
Regional Area	Average # of Moves
West Niagara	5.25
St. Catharines	3.14
Niagara Falls/Welland	2.16
Port Colborne/Fort Erie	3.33

Youth Mobility in Rural Areas

Significantly greater mobility among West Niagara youth, compared to youth in other areas of the Region, can be seen in the above table. This area of Niagara is the most rural of the targeted districts. There is no youth shelter here so youth must make their way to St. Catharines or Niagara Falls. As a result, youth in West Niagara have much higher rates of couch surfing compared to other geographic areas. Since couch-surfing is a very temporary housing solution it makes sense that West Niagara youth would have moved more than youth in other areas. As one West Niagara youth stated, “I don’t feel comfortable mooching off of friends. I stay two or three days, after that you are overstaying your welcome.”

Although transportation to services is a barrier in Niagara, since inter-city transportation is limited, transportation was not the primary reason youth opted for couch surfing. They described a fear of going to a large, unfamiliar city as expressed in the quote below from a West Niagara youth:

They tried to get me to go to the [the youth shelter] but I didn’t want to go to St. Catharines, I don’t know it there. Plus my friend went to St. Catharines and got shot there. It scares me when I’m in the city because cities are full of messed up people... Services are available in the city but not here. I’m scared to go to the city, but I would like those things.

A couple of West Niagara youth had been to the youth shelter in St. Catharines and came back:

We stayed there for two nights, three nights, and then came back here. It was too crazy there, and it was really weird being there... It felt really uncomfortable. You know you would go outside and it was totally different, you walked outside and there were cars, and people-city, right- way different than here. Felt more peaceful here.

Several youth from the Fort Erie/Port Colborne area of the region also expressed a desire to remain in their own community rather than leave friends and family to obtain services in an urban area. The following statement was made about services that are needed:

...and a local shelter, to not have to go to Welland if you need a place to stay, and leave your friends and everything. That's why if I hear someone is homeless I would always offer them my couch, a place to stay until they get something.

Lifetime Housing Mobility/Disruption

There was significant mobility among the youth who moved frequently while they were still quite young, primarily due to family disruption. Of the homeless youth in Niagara, only 6 of the 40 youth (or 15%) had been in the same living situation for their entire youth prior to becoming homeless. The majority of youth (85%) had experienced either a change in family make-up through divorce, had been sent back and forth between parents, had lived with other family members, and/or spent time in the care of Children's Aid Society. Three of the six youth who had remained in the same living situation throughout their lives had witnessed or experienced abuse in their parental home. This family instability was often, though not always, combined with housing instability. And housing instability did not necessarily result in frequent homelessness, as demonstrated in a youth's description of the combined family disruption/housing instability that occurred before homelessness:

When I was a kid we moved around a lot – my Mom... moved us around because she was trying to hide us from our Dad; she did everything she could to keep us away from him because he used to beat her every day and us. Court stated he wasn't allowed near us but he didn't really follow the law. He'd break into our house. One time he crawled in through our bathroom window – I was 7 years old – told us to pack our stuff, put us in a cab and took us back to Hamilton. We were in Vancouver. I bawled my eyes out. I didn't want to leave my mom – I love her to death. It took 3 or 4 years before we got back to mom.

Categories were developed for the youth in Niagara according to the frequency of homelessness prior to the study. The "housing history" categories developed were first/second time homeless, unstable housing, and chronic or prolonged homelessness. At the time of the first interview, 11 of the 40 youth were homeless for the first or second time, and 22 or 55% of the youth had experienced chronic homelessness. This left a group of 7 youth whose lives were character-

ized by a combination of unstable housing and/or unstable family life. These youth had experienced lengthy episodes of unstable housing, which included three or more moves in location and/or three or more changes in guardianship. The following statement describes the disruptive life one youth experienced:

My mom didn't like me, she sent me to live with my auntie. My auntie didn't like me, sent me back to my dad, and they kicked me out a week after so it's kinda like I didn't really care because I was getting sent everywhere you know.

Considerable family disruption and mobility was found among most of the youth in Niagara before, during and after the study. Mobility was examined by compiling narrative histories on the youth in this study. While mobility was not originally included in the list of childhood stressors, evidence suggests that moving frequently does function as a stressor in the lives of children and adolescents. Studies that look at the impact of frequent moves on children and youth have found adolescent adjustment problems (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002), increased behavioural problems during childhood and increased risk-taking behaviour among adolescents (Jelleyman, 2008), as well as negative impacts on academic performance (Schafft, 2006; Cohen & Wardrip, 2011) and negative impacts on both psychological and physical health (Cohen & Wardrip, 2011).

Childhood Stressors

Reports on youth homelessness in Canada consistently identify early childhood stressors, including a hostile family environment and conflict and abuse as contributing factors to youth homelessness. Some reports note the long lasting impact of childhood stress (Evenson & Barr, 2009; Koeller, 2008; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006) and several suggest that the greater the number of childhood stressors, the more likely it is that youth will become homeless (McLean, 2005; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006).

In this study an index of childhood stressors was used to measure the number of traumatic events that youth were exposed to during childhood and adolescence.⁷ Eleven childhood stressors were included in the questionnaire, as shown in Table 3.

7. The index for this study was adopted from a similar index used in studies on homelessness in Ottawa and Windsor. The index originated in the Statistics Canada National Population Health Survey.

Table 3

Childhood Stressors		
Childhood Stressor	Number of Youth	Percentage of Youth
Frequent parental arguments	26	65%
Experienced/witnessed abuse	26	65%
Parental separation and/or divorce	24	60%
Youth substance abuse	24	60%
Parental substance abuse	23	58%
Long term parental unemployment	19	48%
Youth sent away from home	18	45%
Spent time in a foster home	14	35%
Spent time in custody	13	33%
Experience cultural conflict within family	10	25%
Spent time in a group home	6	15%

The results above indicate high levels of stress in the lives of homeless youth in this study. There were 26 out of 40, or 65% of youth who experienced and/or witnessed abuse. Half of the 40 youth were themselves abused physically or sexually. The primary form of abuse was physical, with 4 youth reporting sexual abuse in addition to physical abuse. Youth who were abused became homeless at a younger age than youth who were not abused.

Parental conflict and/or divorce, substance abuse and abuse were all experienced by over half of the youth, and for many youth these factors occurred together. Of the 26 youth who experienced and/or witnessed abuse, 77% reported frequent conflict between their parents, and 73% also had parents who abused drugs or alcohol. Given the lasting impact of childhood stress, it is significant that all but one of the youth experienced multiple stressors and the average number of stressors experienced was five.

Given the strong connection between youth homelessness and childhood trauma one might expect youth who were already chronically homeless to have experienced more childhood stressors. This was not the case for this population. Youth who were homeless for the first or second time did not experience fewer childhood stressors on average than those who faced unstable housing or chronic homelessness.

To show that multiple childhood trauma does not only affect the chronically homeless or unstably housed, three case examples were drawn from each of the housing categories: one youth who was first/second time homeless, one youth who experienced unstable housing and one youth who was already chronically homeless at the time of the study.

Vanessa (a pseudonym) was homeless for the first time when she was interviewed at age 17. She had witnessed physical abuse of her mother by her father, who also threatened her physically and this conflict with her parents led her to leave home. Prior to making her way to the shelter where she was interviewed, she stayed in an abandoned house with her boyfriend and then couch surfed with several friends. After leaving the youth shelter she and her boyfriend crashed at a one bedroom apartment with other youth he met at the youth drop-in centre, but conflict in the apartment led them to leave. After leaving she and her boyfriend lived outside in a tent and in abandoned buildings. She identified that she has tried to commit suicide. At last contact she was back with her parents, but given the ongoing conflict, was spending most of her time at her boyfriend's place. Vanessa moved at least seven times since the first interview and she had experienced four childhood stressors.

Lance experienced unstable housing while growing up. He lived with parents until he was twelve, witnessing alcohol abuse, conflict and physical abuse between his parents. They divorced when he was 12 and he lived with his mother and brothers. He eventually moved to a northern city with one of his brothers. He was first homeless at 16 when his brother kicked him out after an argument. He spent a week on the street, bumming change for a bus ticket back to Niagara before receiving assistance from the Red Cross' "Operation Send a Child Home". Back in Niagara he lived with his mom, was employed at various short term jobs and was also in custody on 12 different occasions. (He tried to commit suicide during this time.) After getting out of jail the last time he was allowed to return to his mother's on the condition that he was working and helping with the bills. After losing his job he lived with friends and spent time in shelters. At last contact he had been receiving Ontario Works and living in the same place with his girlfriend for about four months. He had experienced eight childhood stressors while growing up and moved two times during the course of the study.

Amber was already chronically homeless when she was first interviewed. Prior to becoming homeless she was living with her mom and they moved often, (*"We moved to like every city and it was always a few months after another, live six months, move"*). She first became homeless at age 14 when her mother kicked her out of the house and she went to live with friends. Then she was sent to live with her dad. Conflict with her father led to her being kicked out by him several times. Then she stayed with her boyfriend at his mother's place (where she was also kicked out) and then at his father's place. Subsequent to the first interview, she bounced from place to place because she could not afford rent on her social assistance income. At the third interview, she had her own place and was working on completing high school. She had both witnessed and experienced abuse had experienced seven childhood stressors and had moved at least three times during the study.

As was noted at the beginning of this article, when focusing on causes of youth homelessness, childhood stressors tend to be viewed as factors that trigger homelessness. But the evidence from this study shows that youth with similar experiences of childhood stress may not end up in the same housing circumstances. Each of the youth above experienced multiple childhood stressors, but at the time of the first interview each had a different housing outcome. Youth in trouble become visible when they are homeless. *But it is important not to conclude from this that their housing difficulties are a reliable warning system for that trouble.* Youth who have experienced significant trauma do not necessarily become visibly homeless. The importance of treatment, as well as housing, will be discussed in the recommendations.

Risky Housing Situations Persist

It is clear from follow up interviews with Niagara youth that many are not stably housed after leaving the shelter system for rental accommodation. A common source of risky housing comes from needing to share housing with other youth in order to afford rent. Sharing housing with youth they have met in the shelter or on the street is problematic since this option involves overcrowding, conflict and bunking with youth they may not trust or whose substance abuse problems complicate their own lives. One youth lost housing and possessions:

I had my own place..., even had my own car, nothing much, but it was mine. My roommates had cocaine problems. They sold my stuff, one day I came home and I was locked out.

The following example from the study provides an illustration of risky housing. In comparing youth narratives, five youth were discovered to be sharing a one bedroom apartment. Their story was pieced together because four of the five youth were connected to the study. The story begins with Julie, a crown ward since she was 12, having been evicted from a foster home. Drop-in centre staff helped her find a one bedroom apartment. After that, four other young people (two couples) whom she met at the drop-in centre moved in with her. There was ongoing conflict over the rules and paying rent. Eventually the landlord evicted her for having too many people staying in her apartment.

Vanessa (profiled in the case example above) and Justin's (her boyfriend, not part of the case example above) story illustrates the risky situations youth often face when trying to find housing. Tired of the conflict in the small apartment, Vanessa and Justin left one night, climbed the local marina fence, broke into a boat, slept there and snuck out the next morning. Justin was then arrested for trying to sneak into an abandoned house and spent time in custody. After getting out, he and Vanessa

rented a room in a house for \$750 a month. The owners used drugs and offered the youth drugs. Vanessa began using ecstasy which was available down the street. The landlords eventually told them they needed to move out. They both headed to conflict-filled homes. Justin spent time with an aunt and then returned. He slept in a tent for awhile with Vanessa. Then he found a place with a friend of his brother's, and had been there for four months at the last interview. Vanessa shared Justin's adventures and after the camping experience went back home, reluctantly, to a conflict-filled situation. She copes by spending lots of time at Justin's place. This case example and the mobility of youth during the study demonstrate that youth face significant barriers in their attempts to secure stable housing, especially without sufficient income to make good choices about living arrangements.

Discussion and Conclusion

When youth who are living troubled and traumatic lives become homeless, their troubled lives become visible. Society is rightly concerned that they have no safe place to live and that their homelessness puts them at risk for poor health, sexually transmitted diseases, violence, and brushes with the law. Homelessness becomes the risk around which efforts are organized, both to understand what causes homelessness and to provide emergency shelter. The literature review demonstrated a growing awareness of the complexity of the causes and impacts of youth homelessness and recognition that homelessness is a process rather than an event. Having said this, there is still a tendency when reporting on youth homelessness to focus on the causes of homelessness.

There are two concerns that emerge in this focus on causes. The first concern is that in order to draw conclusions about homeless youth as a whole, complex individual lives are lumped together and generalized. Bessant (2001) argues that there are problems in moving from group averages to individual cases. One cannot assume that an average risk for a population translates into a specific risk for an individual youth. In addition, in separating out the multiple stresses that occur in youth's lives into disconnected lists of separate factors that "cause" youth homelessness, the combined impact of multiple childhood stresses on individual lives is lost.

A second issue following from the first is that in focusing on childhood trauma as a cause of homelessness, serious events in young lives, such as abuse, may shift from being seen as a serious trauma which requires a response, to being a "cause of homelessness". For homeless youth, abuse, violence, and poverty become things that happened to them that caused their homelessness rather than experiences that contribute to ongoing stress and depression. Rather than asking why youth become homeless, a more fruitful question might be: What was happening in the lives of youth in the process of becoming homeless that

we need to respond to at the same time as addressing their homelessness?

There are two significant issues in the lives of homeless youth in Niagara that need addressing. The first concern is the damaging mobility before homelessness and considerable mobility after homelessness. A second issue is that the most serious trauma in many of these young lives had happened before homelessness and that *homelessness, damaging though it is, was not necessarily the most important dislocation in their lives.*

With regard to the first issue, it is clear that emergency shelter does not necessarily set youth on a path to stable housing. Staller (2004) argues that social policy based on “intuitive” or “obvious” solutions to social problems can aggravate the problem when applied to “complex, dynamic, nonlinear social systems” (380). For example, the Runaway Youth Act passed in the US in 1974, was based on an expectation that youth would move in a relatively straight line from the street to a shelter to home. This expectation map not only fails to capture the complexity of the situation, but also supports an inadequate policy response. Very few youth in Niagara moved from youth shelters to stable housing situations during the time of the study. Such thinking does not account for the complications of past trauma, current strained relationships, and lack of resources on the path to stable housing. Emergency shelter, as important as it is, is not a sufficient resource for youth facing homelessness.

With regard to the second issue, becoming homeless is a process that is complex, at times chaotic, and nested in multiple childhood stressors. Young people tend to experience lives filled with family conflict, unstable housing, abuse, and parental substance abuse and at some point in their tumultuous journey they may (or may not) become homeless; and it is their homelessness that triggers our response. Their homelessness becomes the warning system, the canary in the coal mine. The findings from this study of damaging mobility before homelessness and continuing instability after homelessness suggest that homelessness is not necessarily a very good warning system. Staller (2004), for example, in exploring the possible patterns for runaway youth as they cycle between home, friends, street, and shelter notes that some patterns describe housing instability but not necessarily visible homelessness. In other words, youth whose needs are not a publicly visible problem (like living on the street) may not have their needs addressed.

The recommendations that follow are designed to address both the need for treatment for multiple stresses in the lives of homeless youth and the need for fuller resources to make the transition from homeless to stable housing.

Recommendations

The following section outlines recommendations for program responses that address the concerns outlined above.

1. Move beyond a focus on emergency shelter to a focus on prevention of youth homelessness. There is growing recognition that prevention is as important as, or even more important than, emergency shelter in the response to homelessness. Overall, prevention strategies in other countries include early intervention to prevent someone from losing their housing in the first place, rapid re-housing for those who become homeless, and services to maintain housing once it has been established (Culhane et al., 2011; Pawson et al., 2006; Quilgars et al., 2011). Prevention is central to the response to youth homelessness in the United Kingdom and Australia (Winland et al., 2011). Key prevention services for youth include respite services (supported accommodation that allows for a cooling off period for the family), supported/transitional housing and family reconnection/mediation programs (Quilgars et al., 2011).

2. Include family mediation programs in services for homeless youth. How can care be introduced into the lives of homeless youth? Family mediation programs, especially accompanied by a case management approach, can begin to address family issues and provide youth with supportive adult relationships (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2011; Pawson et al., 2006; Quilgars et al., 2011; Winland et al., 2011). A unique family mediation program operating in Canada is Eva's Phoenix Family Reconnect Program, which is available to youth in the shelter system and youth in the community who are at risk of homelessness and who want to improve relationships with their families. A case management approach is used at Family Reconnect, with counselling and mental health supports at the centre. This approach helps youth connect to appropriate and effective services. Youth also receive important diagnoses that can help identify mental health issues and/or learning difficulties (Winland et al., 2011).

The outcomes of this program for youth include more active involvement with their family and improved relationships with family members. For many youth whose relationship with their parents is not reconcilable, there are other supportive family members, such as siblings, aunts/uncles, or grandparents, who can be involved. Addressing family issues is important for healing even when reconciliation is not possible: "Even where relations have not been completely reconciled, there is often an increased understanding of the nature of family conflict that helps young people and families move forward with their lives" (Winland et al., 2011:10).

3. Provide comprehensive individual case support in services for homeless youth. At the core of family mediation is case management (Calgary Homelessness Foundation, 2011; Winland et al., 2011), an approach that provides comprehensive transitional supports for individual youth. This support goes beyond addressing youths' relationship with their families to include general counselling, help with mental health issues, and referrals to other agency supports. The Calgary Homeless Foundation's Plan to End Youth Homelessness (2011) includes a case management approach called 'High Fidelity Wraparound Supports'. Extensive supports are provided to youth that follow them regardless of their housing situation. These supports include family counselling, working with schools, social support and family reconciliation. Youth and family identify "people who they consider to be helpers in their lives" (31) who are trained in wraparound principles. Successful outcomes for homeless youth include increased social support, high school completion, and good interpersonal skills. A wraparound case management approach could be used to identify youth who have experienced abuse and other childhood stresses and include a plan for treatment as part of transitional support.

4. Include opportunities for treatment of trauma in services provided for homeless youth in Canada. McLean argues that youth who experience homelessness are "survivors of various forms of abuse and/or trauma; emotional, physical, sexual and economic" and that models of service must "situate opportunities for healing at the core of service delivery" (2005:xi). Serge et al., (2002) found that one of the links between the child welfare and homelessness systems is that youth who have been in care have not been helped to deal with the circumstances that led to their removal from the home. Klodawsky et al., (2006) make the case that homeless youth face an absence of care in their lives. Applying an ethics of care (responding to physical, spiritual, intellectual, psychic and emotional needs) to the situation of homeless youth would mean moving beyond a narrow focus on achieving youth independence and employability to a multi-faceted approach that includes care, treatment for childhood trauma, and integrates social, emotional and practical needs.

5. Provide transitional housing and follow up services for youth as they move on from the emergency shelter system. Homeless youth are still developing skills for independent living. It is unrealistic to expect youth without adult support and with insufficient income and skills to move directly from emergency shelters to stable housing. Insufficient income and a lack of adult support contributed to significant mobility for homeless youth in Niagara after they left the emergency shelter system. Case management and follow up services may be sufficient for some youth to move to independent housing, but youth who are very young or who do not have adult support may not have the

skills to live independently (Quilgars et al., 2011). Transitional housing can play an important role in assisting youth to move to permanent, stable housing.

Family mediation, case management, treatment for trauma and transitional housing should be part of an integrated systems level approach, which Winland et al., define as “bringing together a range of services and approaches that work across the street youth sector, and ideally, also engage with programs, services and institutions ‘upstream’ – that is, before young people become homeless in the first place” (2011:11). Canada’s youth homelessness sector is still largely focused on emergency responses (Gaetz, forthcoming; Winland et al., 2011). The study of youth homelessness in Niagara confirms the need for care and adult support in the lives of homeless youth. Case management, family mediation, treatment, transitional supports and an integrated systems level approach could address the childhood stress experienced by youth before homelessness and prevent the kind of instability and mobility after homelessness that the Niagara youth experienced. As one youth in the study stated:

Homelessness is only a problem if you let it be. It’s only a problem if you don’t do something about it - society doesn’t do something. Its two parts: they have to ask for the help and there has to be somebody there to help them.

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