



Putting an End to Child & Family
Homelessness in Canada:
Report Summary

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Raising the Roof provides national leadership on long-term solutions to homelessness through partnership and collaboration with diverse stakeholders, investment in local communities, and public education.

This report is the result of the three-year Child and Family Homelessness Initiative. This project aims to support communities and government by reviewing existing programs, creating a comprehensive framework, and developing practical tools and recommendations for addressing child and family homelessness in Canada.

Also available:

- [Building a comprehensive framework to address child and family homelessness in Canada: Phase I, an environmental scan](#)
- [Beyond Housing First: A Holistic Response to Family Homelessness in Canada](#)

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Our Community Partners

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**Every night
in Canada
approximately
35,000 people
are homeless**

Imagine waking up in a strange place one morning and not knowing where you are, not recognizing any of your surroundings. Your mom takes you and your siblings to a cafeteria-style dining hall where you eat a bit of breakfast before taking a bus to school. After classes finish, your mom meets you in the schoolyard and you take transit across the city to another strange building for the night. This time, you are sharing a bed with your younger sister, your brother is on the couch and your mom sleeps on the floor of the living room. Yet you know you were lucky to be out of the shelter tonight and in a friend's house. Tomorrow you know the process will repeat itself.

This could be the life of one of hundreds of children who are homeless in Canada right now. For homeless kids, the loss of stability is enormous. While many homeless families are able to access some “permanence” in emergency shelters, others are more transient, staying in temporary shelters and with friends. The disruption to their lives results in many negative consequences, both in their childhood and as adults.

Yet, when most people think about homelessness in Canada, they picture an older, single man sitting on a street corner. Indeed, this image is often perpetuated through media and various charitable fundraising campaigns. However, homelessness is much more complex and involves several different facets and populations groups.

Every night in Canada approximately 35,000 people are homeless; 235,000 unique individuals on an annual basis. For every person who is absolutely homeless, there are at least three more who fall into the hidden homelessness category (Gaetz, Gulliver & Richter, 2014). Homelessness is a disaster in this country, one that has been recognized by the United Nations. If we fail to act soon, this problem is only going to get worse.

Family homelessness (and therefore homelessness amongst dependent children and youth) is a significant, yet hidden, part of the crisis. Some researchers have identified visible homelessness as only the “tip of the iceberg” of what is a much larger and critical, affordable housing problem in Canada. Numerous studies have shown that many families are forced to live in overcrowded, sub-standard housing and regularly make the choice between paying the rent and feeding the kids.

Family homelessness is largely underpinned by structural factors, including inadequate income, lack of affordable housing and family violence. Following the withdrawal of government housing programs and decreased supports, more families are turning to emergency shelters (Gaetz et al., 2013, p. 27).



Family homelessness makes up a significant percentage of the overall homeless population in Canada

Raising the Roof's Child and Family Homelessness Initiative is a comprehensive, three-year examination of homelessness affecting children and their families across Canada. Much of the research that has been done on homelessness focuses on the adult or youth populations, but family homelessness makes up a significant percentage of the overall homeless population in Canada. Families are also one of the highest risk groups for homelessness given the extreme levels of poverty, food insecurity and housing unaffordability in this country.

The Initiative began with an environmental scan of agencies responding to child and family homelessness, followed by interviews with over 40 service providers, community advocates and academic researchers. This led to the development of our conceptual framework for ending child and family homelessness through the areas of Primary Prevention, Systems-Based Responses and Early Intervention Strategies. Each of these areas is discussed in detail in the body of the full report. We have also identified eight pillars which are connected to all three of the framework components. These are:



Poverty/Income



Affordable Housing



Child care



Food (In)security



Discrimination



Intimate Partner Violence



Children's Mental Health and Family Well-being



Stigma



If we only look at downstream solutions instead of prevention we will always be in a reactive mode to the crisis

We then partnered with eight community organizations from across Canada and interviewed 103 agency staff members and 36 family members who were accessing services at the agencies. In September of 2015, we hosted a two-day Summit with 30 National representatives and 20 Provincial representatives and shared some of the preliminary findings from our research. Attendees were invited to participate in facilitated group discussions and those discussions have been incorporated throughout this report. Their critical insights were taken into consideration as we moved towards developing a set of best practices and recommendations for programs responding to child and family homelessness.

The three areas that make up our framework and the eight pillars are, in many ways, inseparable. If we build affordable housing but do not address Intimate Partner Violence, we will not completely stem the flow of women and children into homelessness. If we only look at downstream solutions instead of prevention we will always be in a reactive mode to the crisis.

We have also dedicated a significant portion of this Initiative to children's mental health. According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, approx. 1.2 million Canadian children and youth (1 in 5) are affected by mental health, yet less than 20% will receive appropriate treatment ([MHCC, 2016](#)). These numbers are higher for children and youth experiencing homelessness. Studies into youth homelessness have shown that 40-70% struggle with mental health issues compared to 10-20% of housed youth (Gaetz, 2013). Children who are homeless – and their mothers – deal with a wide range of emotional impacts that often go unnoticed and/or untreated because of the transient nature of their lives and housing instability.

Almost half of children (47%) who were homeless had been diagnosed with anxiety, depression or withdrawal, compared to only 18% of children who were living in stable housing (Hart-Shegos, 1999; National Centre on Family Homelessness, 2011; Zima et al.; 1997).

For children and youth experiencing discrimination – such as those who are from Indigenous, racialized or LGBTQ2S communities – the issue is even starker. Suicide amongst young people is the second leading cause of death – representing approximately one-quarter of deaths for those aged 15-24. For Indigenous males the suicide rate is 126 per 100,000 and for Indigenous females it is 35 per 100,000. This contrasts with the rates for non-Aboriginal youth of 24 in 100,000 for males and 5 in 100,000 for females ([Health Canada, 2015](#)).



...we have developed resources that can be used... to encourage promising practices

Solving homelessness amongst children, youth and their families means we can also greatly reduce adult homelessness. Growing up in poverty, encounters with the criminal justice or child welfare systems, experiencing trauma and abuse at a young age as well as being from a racialized or Indigenous background, are all risk factors for homelessness. It is incumbent upon us to take a stand for children to prevent an ongoing, self-perpetuating cycle.

Through this work we have developed resources that can be used by community organizations and government to encourage promising practices. To that end we have also generated recommendations – both short and long-term for communities, service providers and governments at all levels.

Recommendations for ALL Levels of Government

We recommend that the federal government, in conjunction with the provincial, territorial and Indigenous governments:



Recommendation 1.0 – Support and fund national coordinated response and action on Children’s Mental Health.

Recommendation 2.0 – Develop and fund a National Housing and Homelessness Strategy.

Recommendations for the Federal Government Only

We recommend that the federal government:



Recommendation 3.0 – Develop and fund a National Poverty Reduction Strategy focusing on family poverty.

Recommendation 3.1 – We further recommend the implementation of a National Housing Benefit.

Recommendations for the Provincial/Territorial Governments Only

We recommend that provincial and territorial governments:



Recommendation 4.0 – Implement a “One Child, One Case” policy for all government services.

Recommendation 5.0 – Develop a Ministerial Homelessness and Housing Secretariat/Roundtable to Work on Preventing and Ending Homelessness.

Recommendation 6.0 – Develop a province/territory-wide Plan to End Homelessness.



By addressing
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solutions
are within
our grasp

Recommendations for Municipal Governments Only

We recommend that municipal (or regional where relevant) governments:



Recommendation 7.0 – Review bylaws and municipal practices to ensure a focus on “inclusionary zoning” and development of affordable housing.

Recommendation 8.0 – Develop, in partnership with other levels of governments and/or non-profit or private developers, new emergency shelters, transitional and/or permanent housing aimed at families with children.

Recommendations for Community Agencies



Recommendation 9.0 – Work to develop a system of care within your local community to provide holistic, wraparound services for clients, including coordinated assessment and common intake.

Recommendation 10.0 – Develop trauma-informed services to better support clients and staff.

It is possible to solve child and family homelessness, but it will take commitment from all levels of government and cooperation between all human sectors. By addressing the issues identified in our pillars and using the various components of our framework solutions are within our grasp. We have the ability to do it; the question is do we have the will to do it?



Without a focus on prevention or early intervention we will continually face a flow of people into homelessness

“I think there are two main thrusts that we need going forward, one is we need ideological change. We need abandonment of this extreme individualism, we need a broader societal recognition that we are a community, that we do have shared responsibilities and we have shared interactions and that in fact I am my brother’s keeper at least to some extent. And how do we get that ideological change? Well you know it has to sort of percolate up, it has to come from communities but it also has to come top down. We have to stop having governments that play off the rich against the poor or one group against another or one community against another so governments have an important role to lead but communities also have a piece to play” – Ernie from Campaign 2000.

The framework of Primary Prevention, System-Based Responses and Early Intervention is critical to move us away from reactive responses to homelessness. We currently spend over \$7 billion on emergency services and homelessness response. Implementing positive solutions including housing will, in the long run, be cost-effective. Without a focus on prevention or early intervention we will continually face a flow of people into homelessness, even as we solve it faster for people once they have become homeless.

More importantly, it will be more humane and will reduce the number of children and their families suffering from mental health issues.

“The whole thing is reactive. So it’s always after the fact. So even from a governmental standpoint, federally, it follows us like a hot potato, so there’s not a lot of investment into prevention, or into things like going before the problem and providing infrastructure” – E4C Focus group.

We need to recognize the interconnectivity of the systemic factors that create and maintain homelessness. Rather than viewing them in isolation we need to develop cross-sectoral responses that create systems change. We also must understand that because of the diversity of needs that homeless families have we cannot use a one-size-fits-all response and expect to succeed. There are many pathways into homelessness and we must develop a wide range of pathways out of homelessness to develop achieve the greatest results.



...we need
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This means that we need to think of housing on a continuum and develop a range of housing options including transitional housing, supportive housing, family-based Housing First and permanent housing – with and without subsidies. We will never end homelessness with a concerted effort to develop a national housing strategy that includes significant investment in the building of new, safe and affordable social housing in all communities across the country.

There is sometimes a perception that human service agencies and the employees of these organizations will reject changes because of a fear of job loss. In reality, many of these jobs will transition and in the end will have a more positive focus. Homeless outreach workers can become housing support workers. Children's workers in hostels can become child educators or support counsellors for housing programs. Human service workers generally accept this change as a positive force because of the improvements in the lives of their clients.

Rather than positioning agency versus agency, sector versus sector, as competing in a battle, we need to develop coordinated partnerships to enable systems-responses. Only by working together will we have the skills, resources and opportunities to make a difference. We know the answers and solutions needed to solve one of Canada's biggest disasters. It is time that we end homelessness.



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