2.3 ENGAGING WITH NEWCOMER YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of literature on homelessness in Canada, with research addressing such areas as youth at risk of homelessness, homelessness among adults and families, and homelessness among immigrants and refugees. Low-income groups are most likely to experience housing issues and homelessness, with visible minorities, recent immigrants, and single parents disproportionately represented (Polanyi et al., 2016). The national At Home / Chez Soi study of the Housing First model found that immigrants and refugee adults are especially vulnerable to becoming homeless as a result of the discrimination they experience when seeking employment and housing, and also tend to experience housing instability in the form of residential crowding, sometimes referred to as hidden homelessness (Zerger et al., 2014). Current literature has explored the impacts of immigration and settlement on adults and families, but to a lesser extent on the youth population (Preston et al., 2011; Raising the Roof Foundation, 2009). Limited research in Canada has focused specifically on newcomer youth, their pathways to Canada, pathways to homelessness, the barriers these youth face, and the solutions they see as most important to achieving success.

HIDDEN IN OUR MIDST & WHAT'S THE MAP?

In 2014, Hidden in Our Midst, a Toronto-based study led by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and the Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAST), sought to fill a knowledge gap regarding experiences of homelessness among newcomer youth in Toronto (CAMH & CAST, 2014a). A follow-up project called What's the Map?[1] focused on disseminating the findings to social services, practitioners, and government decision makers. Both initiatives built on leadership of young immigrants and refugees who were

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[1] What's the Map? was a youth-led initiative with support from the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, the Wellesley Institute, and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, with funding from the Laidlaw Foundation. The project represented phase 2 of the Hidden in Our Midst research project and involved knowledge dissemination of study findings.

born in the Global South[2] and who have lived experience with homelessness after arriving in Canada. These youth played a partnership and leadership role alongside the interagency partners and community advisory committee members that were initially convened to support the Hidden in Our Midst study.

This chapter is informed by the cumulative learnings from the Hidden in Our Midst and What's the Map? projects. The chapter aims to increase understanding among social service practitioners of the complex issues facing newcomer youth who experience homelessness in Canada. It strives to increase the capacity and commitment of organizations and practitioners to meaningfully engage newcomer youth at the casework, organizational, and systemic levels to better address the unique needs of youth, build on their strengths, and improve individual outcomes. We also share some models and tips on meaningful youth engagement from our experiences with the two projects.

SUPPORTS TO PREVENT & REDUCE HOMELESSNESS AMONG NEWCOMER YOUTH

Hidden in Our Midst explored service gaps and barriers experienced by newcomer youth who are homeless and sought to map out recommendations to improve supports and outcomes for this group. The study surveyed 74 newcomer youth aged 16–24 who immigrated to Canada and have experienced homelessness since their arrival. They completed a demographic survey and participated in qualitative focus groups or interviews to unpack their experiences engaging with service systems. The study also included a short survey that was completed by 39 agencies across the City of Toronto to identify supports and gaps in service to newcomer youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness (CAMH & CAST, 2014a). This community-based research project engaged an advisory committee of community partners serving youth who are homeless and newcomer populations, as well as 10 youth peer researchers. Results of the research were widely disseminated in Toronto and nationally (Keung, 2014). A research infographic was designed with the leadership of the peer researchers (CAMH & CAST, 2014b).

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[2] The term "Global South" refers to both low- and middle-income developing countries.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

The demographic survey revealed that nearly two-thirds of participants immigrated from Africa or the Caribbean, over one-third identified as LGBTQ2S, half had a grade 12 education or higher, and over one-quarter have held refugee claimant status (CAMH & CAST, 2014a). Participants reported experiences of trauma and physical and sexual abuse. Their top reasons for immigrating to Canada included family reunification, education, danger in their homeland, and employment opportunities.

In the qualitative interviews and focus groups, youth described resistance to arranged marriages, challenges living with a host family in Canada, and family conflicts stemming from differences in parent and child expectations around the practice of religious and cultural values in Canada. Participants also highlighted different cultural expectations and understanding of what constitute physical abuse and acceptable forms of child discipline. Some participants were afraid of shaming their parents by leaving home or seeking service supports. Participants described their efforts to navigate services as a confusing maze and identified many barriers to accessing basic supports such as health care and education. Some felt that service providers underestimated their strengths and capacities, while others reported having experienced racism when seeking housing and employment. These findings offer a glimpse of some of the additional challenges that situate newcomers among the most vulnerable of youth who are homeless.

INTERVENTION COMPONENTS

This section outlines four intervention considerations based on our learnings in the What's the Map? project.

ENGAGEMENT MODELS FOR WORKING WITH NEWCOMER YOUTH

One of the most commonly used models of youth engagement in mainstream services involves including youth on advisory committees, and in consultations, focus groups, and other forums. One concern about these engagement practices is that these organizations

often work from a "for youth" philosophy that engages youth in a tokenistic manner. The following features characterize the "for youth" engagement process:

- Youth are not given meaningful leadership roles to improve the services they use.
- Youth engagement is a token effort to present the appearance of listening to and including youth, but is not meaningful or genuine.
- Youth do not receive full information when they are given advice.
- The lack of diversity among the youth chosen to be representatives often leads to a process of selecting the "cream of the crop," who present the most professional skills and are higher functioning.

In contrast to this model, the Hidden in Our Midst and What's the Map? projects strived toward a "with youth" philosophy. One tool that organizations can use to enhance engagement with youth who are newcomers and/or experiencing homelessness is Hart's ladder of engagement (Hart, 1992), which is widely used to showcase the spectrum of youth engagement models (see Figure 2.3-1).

FIGURE 2.3-1. HART'S LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT

Organizing/governing/control	Empowerment/meaningful engagement
Lived experience initated, leadership	Empowerment/meaningful engagement
Lived experience initiated, partnerships	Empowerment/meaningful engagement
Adult/organization initiated, shared decision making	Tokensim moving toward engagement
Informed dialogue	Tokenistic
Assigned but informed	Tokenistic
Tokenism	Non-engagement/participation
Decoration	Non-engagement/participation
Manipulation	Non-engagement/participation

An ideal approach is for organizations that work with youth to aspire to and adopt practices that reflect the top of the engagement ladder. This could be achieved in part by engaging and hiring youth who have lived experience and familiarity with system services, and by providing training and opportunities to lead projects, strategize, and contribute to decision-making activities.

Practitioners working with newcomer youth who are homeless should seek to build on each person's skills, knowledge, and life experiences. It is important not to assume that these youth lack educational or professional credentials and experience, attained in either their homeland or Canada. Youth can be impacted negatively by stereotypes, low expectations, and negative assumptions, especially if they have already experienced marginalization and discrimination as a newcomer to Canada or as a racialized person.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CASE STUDY: WHAT'S THE MAP?

What's the Map? is an example of a project that aspired to the activities at the top of Hart's (1992) ladder of engagement. It was led, initiated, and organized by youth with lived experience of homelessness and being a newcomer to Canada. This project was led by two young women with lived experiences as immigrants and of homelessness in Canada. It was developed in partnership with CAST, the Wellesley Institute, and CAMH, with funding from the Laidlaw Foundation.[3] The What's the Map? project tag line was "Newcomer youth leading the call to action: Designing a support system that works." The goal was for a group of young leaders to raise awareness of the needs in the newcomer youth community and effect change in service provision, which included improving cross-sectoral policies, programs, and system coordination to ensure services engage newcomer youth more effectively, especially those who are refugees or lacking status in Canada.

What's the Map? collaborated with youth with lived experience, who were the primary project implementers and decision makers. The partner agencies played a support role by managing funds; providing space for meetings, programming, and events; mentoring project managers; and assisting with mediation, training, and strategic planning.

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[3] Additional support and mentorship was received from the Office of the Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. Over a dozen organizations, including child welfare, mental health, legal clinics, settlement, youth and family services, housing advocacy, and research and health promotion, provided support on the community advisory committee of What's the Map?

The project managers recruited 10 young leaders aged 18–24 who worked together for one year. These youth were given leadership opportunities and contributed to outreach and training of social service providers, government policy makers, political leaders, and decision makers. This project also helped them address some of their own personal challenges and stresses through social connections, orientation to the City of Toronto with their peers, assistance with service system navigation, and other support from the project managers.

The following characteristics set What's the Map? apart from other youth engagement models:

- Youth had lived experiences of homelessness and migration to Canada from low- and middle-income countries.
- Project participants represented a diverse range of personal, academic, and professional backgrounds; gender and sexual orientation identity; racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds; and diverse pathways to Canada.
- Youth were called project leaders and managers, not clients or customers.
- Youth assumed power, influence, and responsibility for project deliverables, and received advice rather than direction from interagency partners.
- Youth presented Hidden in Our Midst research findings and What's the Map? recommendations at national and local conferences and met with government and agency decision makers, as well as front-line service providers.
- Facilitated mentorship opportunities existed between youth in addition to mentorship from service provider staff.
- Youth retention rates were high throughout the 12-month project period and youth provided positive feedback.

Keeping youth engaged with What's the Map?

What's the Map? was successful in engaging and retaining six of the 10 young leaders and the two co-managers until the end of the project. The project achieved success in various areas:
- It provided consistent leadership, with two project managers coordinating activities.
- A recruitment call for applicants included merit-based selection criteria; a diverse group of project leaders was hired.

- Meaningful orientation and training opportunities were provided for youth, which included:
  - Sharing information on Hidden in Our Midst research findings;
  - Developing facilitation skills;
  - Building advocacy strategies;
  - Doing digital/online video production;
  - Creating policy-making processes; and
  - Attending conferences and developing presentations about mental health, housing, homelessness, newcomer/refugee issues, and youth equity.
- Youth were validated by policy and agency decision makers based on their lived experiences, expertise, and communication of recommendations.
- What's the Map? received invitations to present at conferences and other events, with opportunities shared among project managers and young leaders.
- Relationship building among youth happened through work on project deliverables and skill development for all youth involved; all of this was "real work," not token engagement.
- Multiple communication platforms were used, including a What's the Map? Facebook page, text messaging, phone calls, face-to-face meetings; Google Docs was used to collaborate on documents.
- Monthly What's the Map? leadership meetings provided an opportunity for youth to chair and present at meetings and to give input on agendas and plans.
- Joint meetings and relationship building with agency members on the community advisory committee occurred, where stories and reports on work were shared.
- Participants received financial supports, including transportation assistance, child care for youth with children, and honorariums above minimum wage to recognize time and expertise.
- Through these presentation and advocacy experiences, youth were able to build confidence over the course of the project.

ENGAGING YOUTH ACROSS THE SOCIAL SERVICE SYSTEM

In this section, we will share interventions for improving practitioner and service system engagement of newcomer youth who are homeless across the social service system. The What's the Map? project disseminated and dialogued with multiple agencies and policy decision makers about the Hidden in Our Midst recommendations to better engage these youth at all levels of the service system: at the casework and individual agency service-planning levels, and in systems planning and coordination in larger service systems.

Engagement at the casework level

Although there has been a shift toward youth collaborating with caseworkers to map out their anticipated service plans and personal goals, there is a need to embed this principle in all services for newcomer youth who are homeless. Too often, casework with young people is based on a medical model where the caseworker or counsellor is the "expert" and the young person is the "client" who receives advice. Case planning must extend beyond the scope of the first agency a youth seeks out in order to develop a holistic plan based on the youth's identified goals. There should be an effort to work with and empower youth to coordinate the range of supports they require.

Engagement at the agency service-planning level

Inclusion of youth with lived experience of homelessness who are newcomers or refugees or who lack status in Canada can be an effective way to shape more responsive service planning and design. From logistical considerations, such as the time and location of programming, to policy and program content, service planning can be improved with input from the target population. In addition, youth with lived experience of homelessness can provide vital information on barriers to participation and methods of outreach. Hiring and involving youth in program development and delivery must be coupled with mentorship and other supports. Peer models of self-help support and expanding social connections between youth with lived experience of homelessness can also contribute to positive outcomes and capacity building among newcomer youth who are homeless.

Engagement in system-wide planning and coordination

It is important for those in decision-making positions in social services to include newcomer youth with lived experience of homelessness to inform systems-wide planning, policy development, coordination, and integration. These young people have firsthand experience of navigating complex systems, services, and legal frameworks across federal, provincial, and municipal service delivery models. In Hidden in Our Midst and What's the Map? youth highlighted gaps and opportunities for service systems and agencies to meet the needs of youth more effectively, and to ensure their dignity, personhood, and individual realities are respected and better understood. Youth made the following recommendations:

- Develop national, provincial, and municipal cross-sectoral networks to integrate, design, and improve programs.
- Develop accessible multi-service agencies or "one-stop" hubs for newcomer youth supports.

- Implement anti-oppression and anti-racism service standards and audits.
- Develop accessible online resources and networks for newcomer youth.

> **Case study: What's the Map? cross-sectoral forum**
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> What's the Map? project managers, youth leaders, and agency partners organized a successful forum on newcomer youth homelessness with a focus on conversations and solutions across cross-sectoral services and government bodies. This event was attended by over 100 stakeholders from multiple sectors, including housing, mental health, youth justice, education, health, youth shelters, immigration, settlement, and child welfare. Representatives from federal, provincial, and municipal levels of government participated.
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> The forum was able to fill a gap by bringing together diverse organizations, agencies, sector stakeholders, and service systems that touch on the lives of newcomer youth who are homeless but that tend to operate in silos. Young people shared stories and examples of challenges they have encountered in navigating the service system and of the need to address access barriers. These stories echoed findings from the Hidden in Our Midst research: youth described feeling marginalized and facing multiple barriers when trying to access services from various organizations, sectors, and systems concurrently. Connections made at the forum resulted in follow-up meetings with project leaders, managers, and decision makers.

INCREASING SERVICE ACCESS FOR NEWCOMER YOUTH

Improving service accessibility must go beyond providing information in plain language or multilingual formats. Many newcomer youth are part of the hidden homelessness population and may experience additional barriers to accessing mainstream services because they lack legal immigration status in Canada (CAMH & CAST, 2014a). Organizations, sectors, and systems need to find creative ways to increase outreach, access, and safety of youth around services.

Youth involved with Hidden in Our Midst and What's the Map? recommended that newcomer youth with lived experience of homelessness would benefit from user-friendly information that is accessible online so they would not have to seek services in a physical location. Similar to the need to develop policies that can positively impact the most people, there is a need to generate and implement multiple ways of disseminating information and engaging with diverse people so their needs are met in ways that safeguard and benefit them.

CULTURAL HUMILITY IN WORKING WITH NEWCOMER YOUTH

Youth involved in What's the Map? proposed cultural humility as a best-practice approach to replace cultural competence. Cultural humility aligns with meaningful anti-oppression and anti-discrimination policies, practice, and policy frameworks. Cultural competence is the ability to successfully acquire all information necessary in order to make accurate references to a culture. An anti-oppression and anti-racist approach considers interlocking factors and intersecting oppressions such as race, age, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, whereas cultural humility is a knowledge exchange process which acknowledges that the person you are working with is an expert in their own life.

Waters and Asbill (2013) described the following factors that guide a lifelong process toward cultural humility:

- Commitment to critical self-reflection, evaluation, and critique;
- Desire to fix power imbalances in the relationship, seeing the client as the "expert" in their life in terms of history, identity, preferences, symptoms, and strengths; and
- Aspiring to develop partnerships with people and groups that advocate at a systemic level to address inequality and community needs that go beyond an individual casework level.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS & PRACTISING CULTURAL HUMILITY

- Check in with newcomer youth throughout all casework activities to ensure your services are not a mismatch.
- Provide resources and opportunities that are integrated within services to engage youth on an ongoing basis, not simply during "one-off" events or opportunities.
- Seek to understand the diverse strengths and potential of newcomer youth.
- Engage newcomer youth with peer support models.

EMPOWERING NEWCOMER YOUTH TO LEAD INTERVENTIONS

- Engage youth with decision makers at all tables.
- Involve family where appropriate; accommodating families in intervention work may require developing multilingual capacities among staff; even if youth are proficient in English, their parents may not be.

FOCUSING ON PREVENTION

- Educate and empower youth to locate and access services in your local community or closest urban centre.
- Engage newcomer youth to assist with outreach activities.
- Support newcomer youth who are homeless to advocate and secure supports with determinants of health such as housing and income security.
- Prevent homelessness through education among peers and newcomer youth regarding landlord and tenant laws and access to housing help centres.
- Partner with newcomer youth, faith groups, and agencies to develop prevention supports for immigrant and newcomer families, and focus on addressing intergenerational conflict. In the Hidden in Our Midst study, youth cited conflict with family and abuse within the family as key reasons they first entered into a situation of homelessness. During the focus groups and interviews, some youth described conflicts with family or parents as arising from different expectations and views on cultural traditions.

- Promote information to newcomer youth about their rights to be protected from abuse, assault, and exploitation.

ALLOCATING RESOURCES FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

- Dedicate staff resources and funds to hire youth as leaders, trainers, and peer supports.
- Ensure sufficient budget funds for honoraria, travel, refreshments, and child care for youth who are hired to support project activities.
- Offer capacity- and skills-development resources around conflict resolution, mental health training, understanding system navigation, and group facilitation skills.

KEY MESSAGES FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Seek to engage the voice and expertise of newcomer youth at all stages of the service continuum via casework, program planning, and systems planning.
- Make the following commitments:
  - Identify ways in which your organization can improve coordination with other agencies and groups to improve services for newcomer youth who are at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness.
  - Build staff learning; critical reflection; and anti-oppression, anti-racism, and cultural humility frameworks when working alongside newcomer youth.
  - Promote staff and organizational leadership around preventing homelessness among newcomer youth and be a champion in your organization or agency.
- Develop a plan to improve engagement with youth in your agency/department with the involvement of young newcomers. Use the following activities to promote engagement:
  - Look at the existing model of engagement and identify gaps and opportunities that can be addressed through participation by newcomer youth.
  - Adopt a peer-positive approach to all casework and programming for newcomer youth and families (Northwest Toronto Service Collaborative, n.d.).
  - Allocate resources to make your model sustainable: young people should have their time and expertise recognized through financial compensation.
  - Use the capacity among newcomer youth who are homeless to be leaders, trainers, and peer supporters in your organization.

- Connect and coordinate supports or pilot projects with other organizations that are engaging with youth or newcomers.
- Participate in or build a community of practice.
- Explore prevention supports for newcomer youth who are homeless that include family involvement and informal support networks (e.g., faith communities, cultural communities).
- Collect and understand your organizations' service and demographic data in relation to your municipality and other jurisdictions. Ensure you are reaching these populations and meeting their unique cultural and linguistic needs.
- Recruit youth to assist with outreach initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This chapter highlighted the issue of homelessness among young newcomers as a priority service area and shared learnings from our research and project experiences. Findings from the Hidden in Our Midst study of homelessness among newcomer youth in Toronto indicate that newcomer youth are a diverse population on the basis of country of origin, ethnic and racial background, sexual orientation, educational attainment, and pathways into homelessness. Some newcomer youth arrive as unaccompanied minors with limited or no family connections in Canada; others have experienced family breakdown in the process of migration and settlement; still others who identify as LGBTQ2S face additional barriers and risks upon arrival. These were some of the narratives that emerged from our work in Hidden in Our Midst and What's the Map? Front-line agencies, organizations, and systems across all levels of government serving newcomer families and youth require multiple tools that build on their current knowledge base and complement existing organizational practices and leadership. The ongoing and meaningful engagement of newcomer youth who are homeless in research, program, and policy initiatives will continue to enrich the effectiveness of service delivery and improve individual outcomes.

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