

# Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness



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## DEFINITION

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**“Youth homelessness” refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence.**

Youth homelessness is a complex social issue because as a society we have failed to provide young people and their families with the necessary and adequate supports that will enable them to move forward with their lives in a safe and planned way. In addition to experiencing economic deprivation and a lack of secure housing, many young people who are homeless lack the personal experience of living independently and at the same time may be in the throes of significant developmental (social, physical, emotional and cognitive) changes. As a result, they may not have the resources, resilience, education, social supports or life skills necessary to foster a safe and nurturing transition to adulthood and independence. Few young people choose to be homeless, nor wish to be defined by their homelessness, and the experience is generally negative and stressful.

Youth homelessness is the denial of basic human rights<sup>1</sup> and once identified as such, it must be remedied. All young people have the right to the essentials of life, including adequate housing, food, safety, education and justice.

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1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#), the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#), the [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#) and the [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination \(ICERD\)](#).

## Why do we need a separate definition of youth homelessness?

Age matters when considering homelessness. While there are some commonalities that frame the experience of homelessness for young people and adults – lack of affordable housing, systems failures in health care and corrections, for instance – there are important factors unique to the experiences and circumstances of youth that justify a youth-specific definition of homelessness:

- Unlike the majority of homeless adults, young people leave homes defined by relationships (both social and economic) in which they were typically dependent upon adult caregivers.
- Youth, in the process of transitioning toward adulthood, may not have yet acquired personal, social and life skills that make independent living possible or appropriate.
- Many young people are in the throes of physical, cognitive, social and emotional development.
- Youth tend to seek, access and respond to services and supports differently than other homeless individuals.
- Young people often avoid the homeless-serving system out of fear of authorities.
- The age at which one is legally considered a child or adult is not consistent across jurisdictions and policy areas, which some times results in barriers to accessing services and supports, and can also create problems in terms of continuity of care.

For young people, becoming homeless does not just mean a loss of stable housing, but rather leaving a home in which they are *embedded in relations of dependence*. Thus, they experience an interruption and potential rupture of natural supports and social relations with parents and caregivers, family members, friends, neighbours and community. It means an interruption of adolescence, and undermines the opportunity to transition into adulthood in a safe and planned way. For all of these reasons and more, youth-based strategies and interventions addressing the needs of young people between 13-24 must also be distinct from those developed for adults who experience homelessness.

## A typology of homelessness and housing insecurity

Youth homelessness describes a range of housing and shelter circumstances experienced by youth. The different degrees of homelessness and housing insecurity that young people may face have been laid out in the Canadian Definition of Homelessness (See Appendix A for the full typology), and include:

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

(Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2012:1)

The different degrees of homelessness are important to consider, as not all homeless youth are absolutely homeless or sleeping rough (“Unsheltered”), nor do they always show up in homeless shelters (“Emergency sheltered”). Some communities have no youth-specific emergency shelters, and in the jurisdictions that do, access may be defined by a narrower age mandate (“under 18” or “16-21”), for instance.

One thing that defines youth homelessness is the greater likelihood that they are “Provisionally Accommodated”. In fact, there is some evidence that young people are twice as likely as adults to be part of the “hidden homeless” population, meaning they may stay temporarily with friends or other family members without any degree of permanence or security (this is often described as “couch surfing”) (Gaetz, Gulliver, & Richter, 2014:42). This has significant implications for service planning and homelessness enumeration.

Finally, we need to consider young people who may be technically housed (living with caregivers), but lack a sense of ‘home’ because their living situation is unsafe, not nurturing or supportive, and is inherently precarious. In these situations, young people are considered to be “At risk” of homelessness.

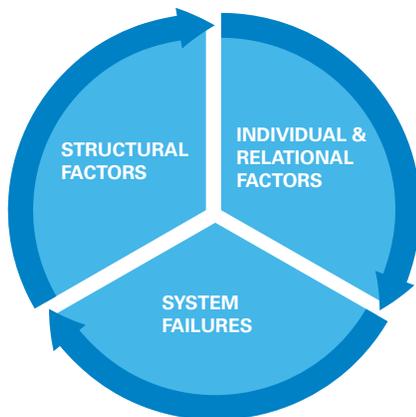
## Key differences within the youth homeless population

In defining youth homelessness one must also consider the diversity of the population in terms of age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation and ethnicity. Much of the research on youth homelessness in Canada shows that males typically outnumber females 2:1 (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; 2009). In addition, some ethno-racial populations tend to be over-represented – most significantly, Indigenous youth (Baskin, 2007; 2013; Brown et al., 2007), black youth (Springer et al., 2007; 2013) and immigrants/migrants to Canada (CAMH & CAST, 2014). Finally, a significant percentage of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ2S (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2009; Abramovich, 2013). These differences matter because many young people are doubly or triply marginalized, not just because of their homelessness, but also due to racism, homophobia and transphobia.

Finally, we need to consider the significant age-based differences within the youth homeless population. Our definition refers to young people between the ages of 13-25 and therefore includes young teens, adolescents and older youth transitioning to adulthood and independence. Developmentally, there is a considerable difference between the needs, circumstances and physical and emotional development of a 14 year old compared to an 18 or 23 year old (acknowledging that some youth may also experience developmental delays). Further complicating the matter is the fact that there is no consistent legal definition of youth; there are a number of key milestones (voting, aging out of care, access to services – including benefits – without parental consent, access to shelters, etc.) associated with specific ages (16 or 18, for instance) that mark the transition of rights and responsibilities, and the movement from child to adult institutions (mental health, justice system, etc.). In some cases these milestones vary from province to province. This means that young people who are homeless may have differential access to services and supports based on age. As such, the differences within the youth homeless population and their resulting experiences need to be considered when developing responses and interventions.

## Pathways into youth homelessness

When we talk about pathways into homelessness, it is important to note that there are a variety of factors that may contribute to a young person leaving home. For many young people, the route into homelessness is neither linear, nor experienced as a single event. More often, youth experience multiple family ruptures and multiple episodes of living outside the home – often staying temporarily with friends or relatives. It is at the end of this process that some youth find themselves in emergency shelters or in places not suitable for human habitation (sleeping outdoors, on rooftops, in abandoned buildings, etc.). As a result, many young people who experience homelessness are part of the “invisible” or “hidden” homeless population.



The key causes of youth homelessness include: a) individual/relational factors, b) structural factors and c) institutional and systems failures.<sup>2</sup>

a) **Individual and Relational factors** - A main cause of youth homelessness is a breakdown or conflict in key relationships within the home. In this case, youth have chosen or were forced to leave an unsafe, abusive, neglectful or otherwise untenable situation (Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz et al., 2002; Karabanow, 2004; 2013; Rew, et al., 2001; Thrane et al., 2006; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Tyler et al., 2001; Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999; Van den Bree et al., 2009). Identity-based conflict, after a young person comes out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or 2-Spirit (LGBTQ2S), is a leading cause of youth homelessness (Abramovich, 2013). Other young people leave home

because of disengagement with school and criminal involvement, as well as learning disabilities, mental health or addictions issues experienced either by them (Anda, et al., 2006; Baker-Collins, 2013; Karabanow, 2004; McEwan & Sapolsky, 1995; Sokolowski, et al., 2013) or someone else in their household (Andres-Lemay et al., 2005; McMorris et al., 2002).

b) **Structural factors** - This includes ongoing problems that a young person cannot control, and which largely originate outside of the family at a broader societal level. This includes social and economic conditions like poverty, inadequate education, underemployment and lack of housing stability, which may also frame the experience of young people and can underlie stressors within the family that can lead to conflict; meaning “home” is no longer a viable option. Discrimination in the form of homophobia, transphobia, racism and bullying are also contributing factors.

c) **Systems failures** - Some young people become homeless after slipping through the cracks of the institutional systems designed as “social safety nets” (such as child protection, health and mental health care, juvenile justice) (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Many young people in government care (child protection) become homeless when their placements break down, leaving them without a place to live, or when they choose to leave their placements and/or have been discharged from care (e.g., for non-compliance) without a place of residence to which they can or will return (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Gaetz et al., 2013; Goldstein et al., 2012; Lemon Osterling & Hines, 2006; Karabanow, 2004; Nichols, 2013; 2015; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006; Serge et al., 2002). That we discharge young people from systems of care without adequate discharge planning and ongoing supports increases the risk of homelessness.

It is important to note that the causes of youth homelessness do not just impact young people in large cities. These factors can impact a young person whether they live in urban, small town or rural settings. What resources are available to support young people and their families may differ in these contexts, however.

2. This framework is drawn from Gaetz 2014a

## The conditions of youth homelessness

Young people who become homeless for sustained periods of time risk involvement in a situation that not only creates short-term challenges, but may also have longer-term impacts on their health, well-being and opportunities. Young people who remain homeless are often forced to leave their communities if there are not adequate services and supports nearby. Leaving home therefore means not only losing one's family, but also one's friends, other caring adults (such as neighbours, teachers or coaches), and ultimately, one's community. The trauma of leaving home is compounded by life on the streets and:

- Worsening health, nutritional vulnerability, greater risk of injury (Boivan, et al., 2005; Kulik, et al., 2011; Tarasuk et al., 2013)
- Increased likelihood of psychological problems and addictions (Kidd 2004; 2013; McCay & Aiello 2013; Barnaby et al., 2010; Boivan et al, 2005)
- Exposure to early sexual activity, exploitation and safety issues (Saewyc et al. 2013; Tyler, Hoyt & Whitbeck, 2000)
- Greater risk of criminal victimization (Gaetz, 2004; Gaetz, O'Grady & Buccieri, 2011; Thrane et al. 2006)
- Greater likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system (Baron, 2013; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; O'Grady et al; 2011)
- Dropping out of school at an early age (Gaetz 2014; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; 2013)
- Entrenchment in the street youth lifestyle (Karabanow, 2004; Gaetz, 2014)

In addition, because services and resources are not always adequate, young people experience:

- Difficulty accessing safe and affordable housing, services and supports, sometimes because of how they are organized, at other times because of age restrictions
- Barriers and challenges to accessing healthcare and support services for LGBTQ2S youth, due to lack of LGBTQ2S culturally competent staff, and homophobic and transphobic discrimination (Abramovich 2012 & 2013)
- Early onset of adult responsibilities, at the same time there is a lack of sustained and ongoing supports (including income, housing, and supportive adults in their lives) necessary to assist them with the transition to adulthood
- Challenges obtaining and maintaining paid employment
- Challenges in participation and achievement in education
- Homelessness systems and services that focus on short-term emergency supports and/or rush them into independent living (Baker-Collins, 2013; Bellot, 2005; Boivan, et al., 2005; Gaetz et al., 2010; Gaetz et al, 2013; Gaetz 2014a; Karabanow, 2004; 2009; Kidd, 2004; 2009; 2013; Kulick et al., 2011; Milburn, et al. 2009; Saewyc et al., 2013)

One of the negative consequences of housing instability and homelessness for youth is that they are thrust into adult roles (getting a job, finding housing, financial management, sexual relations) at an accelerated rate, without access to many of the institutions and activities that are designed to help them navigate the transition to adulthood (school, experiential learning, adult mentoring).

While many young people face significant risks and challenges when homeless, it is important to note that many also have considerable strengths and assets and demonstrate resilience in the face of incredible challenges.

## Youth homelessness from a human rights perspective

Youth homelessness exists because of the denial of the basic human rights of young people and once identified as such, must be remedied as such. Practically, this means that policies, laws and strategies aimed at youth homelessness must recognize international human rights obligations, and be grounded in a human rights framework that will inform all stages of development, implementation and evaluation. A human rights approach requires a paradigm shift, so that instead of creating laws which discriminate or punish youth, all levels of government must urgently address the systemic causes of youth homelessness and provide legal protections for their human rights, including the right to housing. It is an understanding that youth homelessness is not merely about individual circumstance, but rather a failure of states to act on their human rights responsibilities.

A number of international human rights agreements, signed by Canada, define rights relevant to homeless youth. Four core United Nations documents are the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#), the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#), the [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#) and the [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination \(ICERD\)](#).

**While all human rights apply to youth the list below represents the most relevant. THE RIGHT TO:**

ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING

EQUAL ACCESS TO JUSTICE

ADEQUATE HOUSING

ADEQUATE FOOD

EDUCATION

PERSONAL SECURITY & PRIVACY

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

ASSEMBLY

HEALTH

WORK

LIFE

In summary, in order to effectively address the problem of youth homelessness, there is a need for an agreed upon definition that provides consistency, clarity and a consistent age range and which also incorporates a rights-based perspective. Such a common definition provides all levels of government and community groups with a framework for understanding and describing youth homelessness, and a means for identifying goals, strategies and interventions, as well as measuring outcomes and progress. The Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness is designed to support the development and implementation of effective rights-based strategies to prevent and end youth homelessness.

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## HOW TO CITE THE CANADIAN DEFINITION OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS:

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Homeless Hub: [www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessdefinition](http://www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessdefinition)



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The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness is a non-profit, non-partisan research institute that is committed to conducting and mobilizing research so as to contribute to solutions to homelessness. We work together as a group of researchers, service providers, policy and decision makers, people with lived experience of homelessness as well as graduate and undergraduate students from across Canada with a passion for social justice issues and a desire to solve homelessness in our communities.

## Appendix A - Canadian Definition of Homelessness

OPERATIONAL CATEGORY		LIVING SITUATION		GENERIC DEFINITION
1. UNSHELTERED	This includes people who lack housing and are not accessing emergency shelters or accommodation, except during extreme weather conditions. In most cases, people are staying in places that are not designed for or fit for human habitation.	1.1	People living in public or private spaces without consent or contract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public space, such as sidewalks, squares, parks, forests, etc.</li> <li>Private space and vacant buildings (squatting)</li> </ul>
		1.2	People living in places not intended for permanent human habitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Living in cars or other vehicles</li> <li>Living in garages, attics, closets or buildings not designed for habitation</li> <li>People in makeshift shelters, shacks or tents</li> </ul>
2. EMERGENCY SHELTERED	This refers to people who, because they cannot secure permanent housing, are accessing emergency shelter and system supports, generally provided at no cost or minimal cost to the user. Such accommodation represents an institutional response to homelessness provided by government, non-profit, faith based organizations and/or volunteers.	2.1	Emergency overnight shelters for people who are homeless	These facilities are designed to meet the immediate needs of people who are homeless. Such short-term emergency shelters may target specific sub-populations, including women, families, youth or Aboriginal persons, for instance. These shelters typically have minimal eligibility criteria, offer shared sleeping facilities and amenities, and often expect clients to leave in the morning. They may or may not offer food, clothing or other services. Some emergency shelters allow people to stay on an ongoing basis while others are short term and are set up to respond to special circumstances, such as extreme weather.
		2.2	Shelters for individuals/families impacted by family violence	
		2.3	Emergency shelter for people fleeing a natural disaster or destruction of accommodation due to fires, floods, etc.	
3. PROVISIONALLY ACCOMMODATED	This describes situations in which people, who are technically homeless and without permanent shelter, access accommodation that offers no prospect of permanence. Those who are provisionally accommodated may be accessing temporary housing provided by government or the non-profit sector, or may have independently made arrangements for short-term accommodation.	3.1	Interim Housing for people who are homeless	Interim housing is a systems-supported form of housing that is meant to bridge the gap between unsheltered homelessness or emergency accommodation and permanent housing.
		3.2	People living temporarily with others, but without guarantee of continued residency or immediate prospects for accessing permanent housing	Often referred to as 'couch surfers' or the 'hidden homeless', this describes people who stay with friends, family, or even strangers.
		3.3	People accessing short term, temporary rental accommodations without security of tenure	In some cases people who are homeless make temporary rental arrangements, such as staying in motels, hostels, rooming houses, etc.
		3.4	People in institutional care who lack permanent housing arrangements	People who may transition into homelessness upon release from: Penal institutions; Medical/mental health institutions; Residential treatment programs or withdrawal management centers; Children's institutions/group homes.
		3.5	Accommodation/reception centers for recently arrived immigrants and refugees	Prior to securing their own housing, recently arrived immigrants and refugees may be temporarily housed while receiving settlement support and orientation to life in Canada.
4. AT-RISK OF HOMELESSNESS	Although not technically homeless, this includes individuals or families whose current housing situations are dangerously lacking security or stability, and so are considered to be at-risk of homelessness. They are living in housing that is intended for permanent human habitation, and could potentially be permanent (as opposed to those who are provisionally accommodated). However, as a result of external hardship, poverty, personal crisis, discrimination, a lack of other available and affordable housing, and/or the inappropriateness of their current housing (which may be overcrowded or does not meet public health and safety standards) residents may be "at risk" of homelessness.	4.1	People at imminent risk of homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Those whose employment is precarious</li> <li>Those experiencing sudden unemployment</li> <li>Households facing eviction</li> <li>Housing with transitional supports about to be discontinued</li> <li>People with severe and persistent mental illness, active addictions, substance use, and/or behavioural issues</li> <li>Breakdown in family relations</li> <li>People facing, or living in direct fear, of violence/abuse</li> </ul>
		4.2	Individuals and families who are precariously housed	Those who face challenges that may or may not leave them homeless in the immediate or near future. CMHC defines a household as being in core housing need if its housing: "falls below at least one of the adequacy, affordability or suitability standards and would have to spend 30% or more of its total before-tax income to pay the median rent of alternative local housing that is acceptable (meets all three housing standards)."