

Education access for young women experiencing homelessness

What you need to know

Young women who are experiencing homelessness are eager to re-engage with school. This is most likely to occur when there are a range of supports available to them by agencies and when school staff provides long-term support. Efforts to increase access to education for girls who have lived on the street must take into account the need for learning approaches that validate their life experience.

What is this research about?

When schools and other social institutions (such as child welfare, justice, and health care services) fail to provide supports, homeless young women are less likely to access education. Young women who experience homelessness, or who have no fixed address, have additional barriers to education. Social, economic and political factors play a part in their “choice” to leave

school. Young women leave school as a result of the lack of supports, including: safe housing, counselling services, and child care. Without safe and stable housing, young women are more likely to have been victims of personal and systemic violence, sexual assault, and sexual exploitation and/or rape. Many have also had negative experiences with child welfare and the criminal justice system.



KEYWORDS

youth homelessness, criminalization, education access, girls, poverty, social exclusion, violence, youth development

ARTICLE SOURCE

Dhillon, J. (2011). Social exclusion, gender and access to education in Canada: Narrative accounts from girls on the street. *Feminist Formations*. 23(3), p. 110-134.

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What did the researchers do?

The goal of the research was to document how young women who are homeless or living on the street describe their experiences within education. The study took place in Halifax, Saskatoon and Vancouver. It included 118 young women

between the ages of 12 and 24 years old. Data was gathered through 23 focus groups and 14 individual interviews. Out of this group, 77 self-identified as First Nations, 8 as African Canadian and 1 as Mexican.

What did the researchers find?

The researcher highlighted a few key themes based on the research:

- A lack of safe housing made it difficult to: attend school, travel to school, pay school fees and related costs, and maintain hygiene.
- Sexism and sexual harassment were major barriers to completing school. Young women reported sexual harassment by male staff and teachers.
- Many young women reported not fitting in at school due to their experiences with violence and living on the street. This was accompanied by feelings that the school did not care about them. Many found it hard to connect with students, principals or support staff within schools who could not understand their lived realities.
- There is a lack of research on the different experience of aboriginal girls who are homeless.
- Within the school systems, there is a presence of discrimination based on identity including: gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality.
- Community groups and schools must share resources to reduce barriers. This means focusing on housing, racism, sexism, violence, homophobia and poverty.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Policy makers can use this research to change their program planning, with an understanding of how social institutions create additional barriers to access.

Educators and school staff can use this when thinking of supports for female students who have experienced violence and unstable housing. This support may include staff training that considers the vulnerable position of these young women within society.

Service providers may address gaps in education programming for youth by paying attention to the different ways that young men and women experience homelessness. The design of “girl only” learning spaces should be central to this discussion.

The Canadian Homeless Research Network (CHRN) has partnered with the **Knowledge Mobilization (KMb)** Unit to produce Research Summaries on the topic of Youth Homelessness in Canada. The CHRN focuses on education, networking and knowledge mobilization in order to move towards effective long-term solutions to homelessness.



ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

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