

Exiting Street Life Project

Executive Summary

Background

Youth homelessness is a pervasive problem, and one not relegated to low income contexts (e.g., approximately 40,000 in Canada (Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter et al., 2013)). The most prominent causes of child and youth homelessness are maltreatment, poverty, and mental illness. Once on the streets, threats to physical and mental health are great, as evidenced by extremely high mortality rates due in large part to suicide and drug overdose.

Relative to the large body of work examining the risks associated with pathways into youth homelessness and the risks associated with living on the streets, a limited amount of research has concentrated on pathways out of homelessness.

The Exiting Street Life Study was designed to address this gap by carrying out an in-depth, longitudinal, mixed-methods examination of young people as they tried to transition away from homelessness.

Research Design

The study was conducted between 2011-2013 in Halifax and Toronto. 51 young people aged 16-25 were recruited from social service sites and through referrals from participants in the project. To be eligible, the participants had to have been homeless for 6 months in the past and currently be in stable housing from 2 months to 2 years. For recruitment, stable housing referred to any living arrangement other than emergency shelters, couch surfing, or sleeping rough.

The participants were interviewed 4 times throughout the year and at each interview they participated in an in-depth qualitative interview about their past homelessness, their past transition attempts, and their recent experiences with transitioning. Particular focus was given to trying to understand how young people experienced the process of transitioning, the processes they had to go through, and barriers and facilitators youth experienced related to achieving stability and their transition-related goals. Participants also completed psychological scales measuring levels of community integration, self-concept integration, mental health, quality of life, and hope.

Main Findings

Qualitative Findings

- 1) One year is not a very long time in the transition away from homelessness. Although a number of youth made substantial gains in their move towards stability and building a life for themselves, progress was generally slow and a number of youth struggled to maintain basic stability (approximately 25% of the youth lost their housing during the study period).
- 2) The overall process of transitioning for most youth is a cyclical one characterized by slow overall gains in the context of significant setbacks (i.e. 2 steps forward, 1 step back). The main reason for this is that transitioning youth often have limited supports and no 'safety net' such that even minor problems (e.g. a late pay cheque, fight with a roommate) can lead to a loss of housing.
- 3) Major threats to basic housing stability are outstanding legal problems, poor quality housing, ongoing drug and alcohol problems, roommate issues, and exploitative or overly strict landlords.
- 4) In many cases, a period of initial excitement and optimism after finding housing gave way to a longer period of depression, worry, and isolation. The isolation came from youth breaking ties with old street-involved friends and being cut-off from their old social service supports by virtue of trying to avoid emergency shelter or drop-in locations. No longer in survival mode youth now had an opportunity to reflect on past traumas and on the challenges of moving beyond basic stability. Of particular concern to the youth were the limitations imposed by mental health problems and disabilities, deep poverty, limited work experience, limited education, and criminal records.
- 5) Trauma had a lasting and ongoing impact on many youth. Many of the youth had been traumatized by experiences on and off the street including abandonment, victimization, and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The impacts of trauma were felt across many life domains such as relationships, coping skills, learning, motivation, and self-esteem, and posed a significant threat to the transition process.
- 6) Youth benefited greatly from having a person in their life that they could trust and that they perceived as a source of unconditional love and support. This person was most impactful when they were a family member or social service worker (i.e. less likely to be lost in a breakup or falling out), and when they were someone who could provide practical assistance and advice in addition to emotional support. Unfortunately, many of the youth in the sample had no such person and were dealing with all the setbacks, stress, and self-doubt of transitioning on their own.

Quantitative Findings

Our measures of mental health, community participation, self-concept, and quality of life over the one year period supported the qualitative findings and paint an unfortunately grim picture about the transition from homelessness.

- 1) The participants in this study indicated no progress in community integration, physical or psychological, over a year. Quality of life and mental health were erratic and variable across time points and sense of hope was observed to decline significantly. These findings suggest that with a fair degree of uniformity these young people are not flourishing or better engaging community despite their having obtained stable housing and they are losing hope.
- 2) Youth residing in supported housing contexts, as compared with independent housing, reported better community integration, quality of life, and mental health. This can likely be attributed to less financial stress in the case of subsidized accommodation, and the presence of a support worker in the case of supported transitional housing.
- 3) A lower number of moves, more time in their current housing situation, support from a community support worker, and hope for the future were related to a reduced risk of housing instability. The risk factors we included in our composite measure of risk were: not participating in education, employment, or training; the presence of roommates (a risk with this population; Frederick et al., 2014); history of short housing tenure; difficulty with paying rent; difficulty fulfilling personal responsibilities because of drug use; facing criminal charges; and a desire to move. These findings underscore an interplay between housing stability and overall life stability, and the role of hope in the transition process.
- 4) Being female, better mental health, and having a shorter time in transition out of homelessness increased scores on a composite measure of subjective stability. This measure included self-report items for overall quality of life, enjoyment of life, the meaningfulness of life, feeling safe, and satisfaction with living conditions. These findings suggest that young women may have a different outlook on the transition process than men and that a drawn out transition process can make it difficult to ever feel at home or stable. Furthermore, it suggests that poor mental health is tied up with a subjective feeling of instability.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

- 1) There needs to be enhancement of ongoing supports for young people that are transitioning from homelessness. This means that efforts at “housing first” need to ensure that they also include the strong service support that is at the heart of the original model. There is good evidence that delayed transitions are economically costly and that investment in youth transitions will be largely recouped through long-term cost savings. Delayed transitions are expensive because of protracted use of social assistance, unemployment, costly contact with the criminal justice system, and increased use of emergency health services. Not to mention the profound human costs and the risks of long-term marginalization.
- 2) Transitioning young people need improved access to caseworker support that does not disappear when they “age out” of the social service system for homeless young people at age 25. When possible, supports for transitioning young people should be decoupled from crisis-focused services for currently street-involved youth.
- 3) Interventions and supports need to directly address the barriers created by homelessness such as trauma, limited work experience, and police records. Access to support also needs to be streamlined in order to capitalize on transition points and to maintain momentum. There was nothing more demoralizing to youth than to make big changes in their lives just to find themselves blocked around the next corner. Needed are:
 - a. Improved access to affordable housing and support in navigating tenancy.
 - b. Improved access to psychological and trauma counselling.
 - c. Improved access to record suspensions (formerly pardons), as well as follow through on policies that remove non-conviction records from police records checks.
 - d. Improved access to family counselling and reconciliation services.
 - e. Improved access to drug treatment programs.
 - f. Improved access to skills building, apprenticeship, and work opportunities.
 - g. Improved access to programs that foster valued identities, skill building, social interaction, and healthy entertainment and stress relief (sports, art, bike repair, etc.)

Additional Reading

Frederick, T., Chwalek, M., Hughes, J., Karabanow, J., & Kidd, S.A. (2014). How stable is stable? Defining and measuring housing stability. *Journal of Community Psychology*. In press.

Gaetz, S., Donaldson, J., Richter, T., & Gulliver, T. (2013). *The State of Homelessness in Canada – 2013*. Toronto: Canadian Homeless Research Network Press.

Roy, E., Robert, M., Fournier, L., Vaillancourt, E., Vandermeerschen, J., & Boivin, J-F. (2014). Residential trajectories of street youth: the Montreal cohort study. *Journal of Urban Health*. Online First.