

SERVICE PREFERENCES OF HOMELESS YOUTH WITH MENTAL ILLNESS:

HOUSING FIRST, TREATMENT FIRST, OR BOTH TOGETHER

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What do you need to know?

Housing First is a treatment, service and social policy approach based on the idea that a homeless individual's primary need is to attain secure and stable housing before other issues in the individual's life can be dealt with. Its fundamental principle is that housing is a basic right, and should be made available regardless of whether individuals, particularly those with mental health concerns and/or addictions, desire treatment. Despite the fact that youth experiencing homelessness have unique needs, few Canadian studies have investigated the Housing First approach with youth, leaving policy and decision makers without much information on promising solutions to homelessness for this population.

What did the researchers do?

One hundred and eighty-seven youth with mental health and/or addiction concerns from London, Ontario were recruited to participate in a 3-year study tracking their housing preferences over time. This study utilizes a mixed-methods

approach where both qualitative and quantitative data are being collected. Participants agreed to participate in qualitative interviews every six months for a total of four interviews, and their housing and treatment outcomes are tracked quantitatively.

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?



This chapter presents preliminary findings from the longitudinal study *Youth Matters in London: Mental Health, Addiction and Homelessness*, which as of the writing of this chapter is still ongoing. Youth participants are followed over a three-year period in an attempt to gauge their preference between: 1) housing first; 2) mental health and addictions treatment first; or 3) both housing and mental health and addictions treatment together. Results from the first round of interviews are discussed in this chapter.

ARTICLE SOURCE

Forchuk, C. et al (2013). Service Preferences of Homeless Youth with Mental Illness: Housing First, Treatment First, or Both Together. In Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., Buccieri, K., Karabanow, J., & Marsolais, A. (Eds.), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice* (95-109). Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

What did the researchers find?

Based on the preliminary findings, “housing first” was the most frequently chosen housing preference, with forty percent of youth preferring this option to either treatment first or both together. This indicates that for many youth, housing is an important concern as it provides the stability necessary to pursue other goals, including treatment. Housing was also reported to protect from environmental and psycho-social stresses, such as being unable to escape poor weather conditions, no place to sleep, and peer pressure to use drugs. A lack of housing can therefore worsen mental health concerns and/or causes some youth to turn to substances to cope with the associated stress. The results also show that for some youth, particularly those with addictions issues they see as problematic, preferred treatment first, since housing is seen

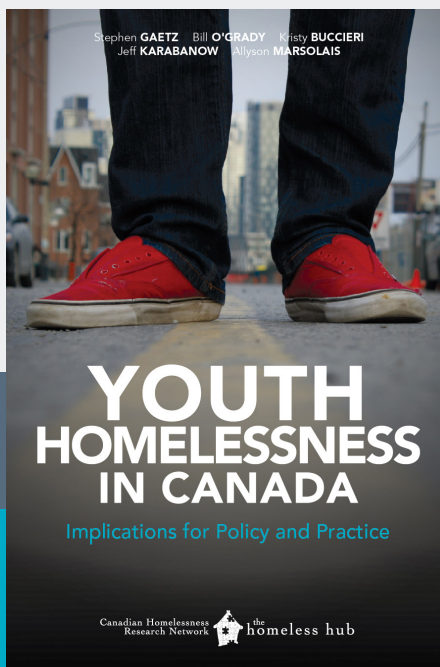
as a stable place in which to continue using substances. Other youth were uncomfortable with the independence associated with the housing first model, and some felt that housing would isolate them from peers and other social networks. The preliminary results suggest that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to treatment and service provision for youth experiencing homelessness, and a variety of housing, mental health and addiction supports are needed.

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How can you use this research?

This research can be used to inform service providers and policy makers of the diverse service and treatment needs of youth experiencing homelessness and how these needs may evolve over time. It is clear from this research that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model of providing housing and treatment for youth experiencing homelessness. This research can also be used as an example for other researchers interested in the topic, as there is a need for more research into the Housing First model specifically for youth.

About the researcher



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This free e-book is available at:

www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessness