



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# **The Impact of COVID-19 on Youth Experiencing Homelessness**

Shifting to a Collaborative, Prevention-Focused Response  
in a Large Urban Area

## Acknowledgement

**The impact of COVID-19 on youth experiencing homelessness: Shifting to a collaborative, prevention-focused response in a large urban area.**

[Access the full report](#)

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# Objectives & Methodology



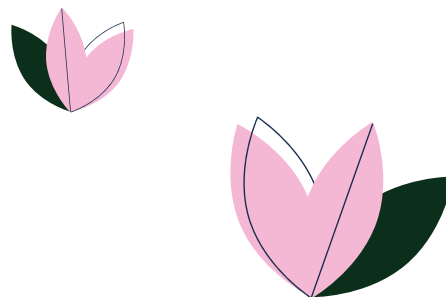
There were four objectives of this research:

- To understand the **impact** of the pandemic **on youth experiencing homelessness** in Toronto in terms of their overall health, wellbeing, and their perception of available services
- To understand the **impact** of the pandemic **on staff** who serve youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto, in terms of their experiences of burnout, wellbeing, and workplace supports
- To identify how the **youth homelessness sector collaborated to address the crisis** and identify recommendations to strengthen this collaboration in the future, both as a response to future pandemics and youth homelessness in general.
- To identify **key recommendations** to prevent the experience of homelessness for youth and/or to facilitate sustained exits from homelessness in anticipation of future pandemics, as well as a general strategy to address youth homelessness.

This research project utilized an exploratory sequential mixed methods design, where qualitative data was collected first to inform the selection of quantitative tools across a larger sample in the second, quantitative phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During Phase One of the study, we interviewed 45 youth and 31 staff from four downtown shelters/hotels for youth experiencing homelessness. Seven additional stakeholders (e.g., municipal government, local advocates) were purposively sampled for interviews. Interviews were conducted between November 2020 and March 2021, or the ‘second wave’ of COVID-19 transmission in Ontario. During Phase Two, surveys were administered across the four agencies to 93 staff and 76 youth between August and September 2021.



# Results



## Objective One

### Impact on Youth

#### 1. QUALITATIVE RESULTS

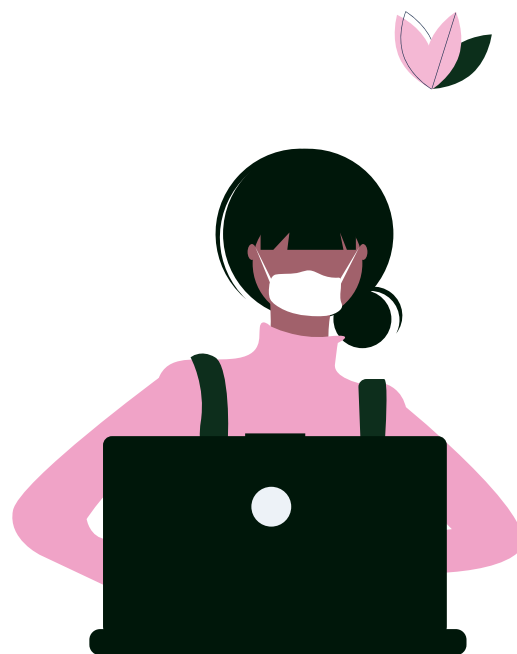
**“I’m just living day by day at this point, and that’s the shitty part. That’s what makes me feel like I’m a shelter kid and I hate that. I feel like I’m in a revolving door and COVID definitely made it spin a lot faster.”**

Youth described how the government-imposed restrictions aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19 led to structural changes in their lives, particularly in accessing employment and housing during the pandemic. With the restrictions closing down many sectors of the economy that often employ young people (such as retail and food service), many youth described being laid off, having protracted job searches, and working in highly precarious positions. While youth experiencing homelessness faced multiple barriers to obtaining housing before the pandemic, the pandemic-related decrease in employment opportunities made saving for housing even more challenging. For some, this made them feel like there was no way to move out of the shelter or hotel. Others reported losing the housing they held before the pandemic due to job loss associated with economic restrictions. In addition, with rental units financially out of reach and the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting health and safety concerns in congregate shelters, a few youth described how some youth faced pressures to move in with family or partners with whom living was unstable or even unsafe.

These structural changes resulted in several psychosocial impacts on many of the young people in this study, particularly heightened feelings of boredom, isolation, mental health distress and, for some, increased substance use. Experiences during the pandemic were not, however, uniformly negative for all participants. Some youth shared how aspects of the pandemic, such as increased personal time, created opportunities for self-reflection and growth. Others described enjoying a period of much-needed rest and respite.

### → Impact on Subpopulations

Staff also described the disproportionate impact on several subpopulations of young people. For instance, participants described how existing systemic racism was exacerbated by the events of the pandemic, contributing to a disproportionate impact on Black youth experiencing homelessness. The pandemic, and the hardships it wrought, was also the backdrop to several highly publicized instances of police brutality against unarmed Black citizens in North America, including the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. While these events were jarring and widely understood to be criminal, they had a particularly powerful impact on those who identify as Black.



Youth that identify as 2SLGBTQ+ were also described as being particularly impacted by the pandemic. Restrictions to in-person programming (including identity-specific services) and the inability to gather in groups was described as contributing to greater feelings of isolation and reduced feelings of safety and belonging. A few staff reported how trans youth, in particular, were prone to feelings of disconnection and loneliness due to the now limited opportunities to gather and freely express themselves within safe spaces.

Newcomer youth staying in Toronto's shelter system also faced unique challenges due to the pandemic. As was the case in various industries, there were often significant delays in application processes related to obtaining status in Canada. This meant that many newcomers staying in shelters were left without access to work or study permits, with no clarity about when these crucial documents would arrive. As such, young people were often left with no way to secure an income and were limited in how they could work towards other personal goals.



## 2. QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Survey findings revealed additional pandemic-related challenges among youth experiencing homelessness. Just over half of respondents (52.7%) reported that it was harder to find or keep stable housing during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 34.7% said it was harder to find a safe place to spend the night. Results from chi-square analysis demonstrated how access to basic needs varied by gender. Indeed, participants who were female-identified or non-binary were statistically significantly more likely to experience difficulties accessing several basic needs during the pandemic, namely food, shelter, and housing.

Regarding employment, 64% of youth reported that the pandemic made it harder to find work, and 41% indicated they had been laid off during the pandemic. Chi-square analysis revealed that this issue was particularly acute for Black youth and youth of colour, among whom 70.2% reported that it was more challenging to find employment during the pandemic. This was in contrast to 35.7% of youth that identified as White.

Isolation and poor mental health outcomes were also manifest in a subset of the survey sample. Thirty-nine percent felt more isolated than before the pandemic, 37.3% indicated that their mental health was worse than before, and 29.3% said the same about their overall wellbeing. Notably, the most frequent response to these questions was that respondents felt *'about the same'*, suggesting that the pandemic's impacts were either limited for these respondents, or that they had already been experiencing hardship in these domains before the pandemic.

As in the interviews, some participants also reported improvements to their health and wellbeing compared to before the pandemic. Indeed, 30.7% said this about their overall wellbeing, and 26.7% said the same about their physical health. Twenty-three percent indicated that their mental health had improved compared to before the pandemic.

Survey respondents were also asked about their experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment. Seventy percent of respondents reported experiencing some form of unfair treatment while at the shelter or hotel, and the most commonly identified reason for this was race (43.1%). Nearly 46% of respondents reported at least one experience of major discrimination outside of the shelter, with race once again being the most commonly identified reason (36.4%).



## Objective 2

### Impact on Staff



“COVID has been absolutely draining and fatiguing for our staff, both physically, emotionally, psychologically. Yeah, it’s kind of like operating in intense crisis mode for way more of an extended period of time that anybody is really supposed to stay in that kind of high adrenaline fast pace.”

#### 1. QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Many staff reported experiencing symptoms of burnout and exhaustion during the COVID-19 pandemic—symptoms they attributed to increased workloads, health and safety concerns of working in congregate settings during the pandemic, and the emotional labour of working with youth experiencing greater levels of distress given the social milieu. Many staff described how burnout was connected to experiences of poor mental health and led some to take leaves from work or resign from the profession entirely. Some also noted how the quality of programming and engagement with youth declined with staff sapped of energy.

When it came to support from their employers during the pandemic, some staff described receiving additional pay through a pandemic premium, flexibility with taking time off, and access to mental health support. Other interviewees felt that employer-provided supports were insufficient to address staff wellbeing during the pandemic. For instance, some felt that their employers made symbolic gestures of support, but these needed to be supplemented with substantial vacation time for frontline workers.

#### 2. QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Staff survey respondents overwhelmingly reported having access to basic health and safety protections while at work. For instance, 94.6% of participants said they had access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), and 84.6% had access to rapid testing. Despite these protections, risks and uncertainty still pervaded the sample. When asked whether they felt they were at risk of contracting COVID-19 and bringing it home to their family, for example, three-quarters of respondents agreed, and 43% said they were uncertain that their organization would take care of their needs if they contracted COVID-19.

Based on questions about professional fulfillment, interpersonal disengagement, and work exhaustion, 53% of all staff surveyed experienced burnout during the two weeks before taking the survey. Notably, 40.9% of staff surveyed indicated that they had been emotionally exhausted at work ‘a lot’ or ‘extremely’ over the past two weeks, and over a quarter (26.9%) said the same for physical exhaustion and lack of enthusiasm at work. Almost a quarter indicated (22.6%) that they felt a sense of dread when they thought about the work they had to do. Chi-square analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between burnout and the length of time staff worked at their agency. Staff who worked at their agency for 3-5 years or 5-10 years differed significantly in their experiences of burnout from the rest of the sample, with 72.2% and 78.6% experiencing burnout over the last two weeks, respectively. In comparison, staff who had worked at their agency for less than one year reported the lowest rates of burnout, with only 19% experiencing burnout over the last two weeks.

Nearly half of staff survey respondents (46.2%) indicated that their overall wellbeing had taken a toll during the pandemic, and that their mental health (48.4%) and stress levels (48.4%) had worsened. A smaller proportion of staff reported that their wellbeing had improved since the onset of the pandemic. Nearly a quarter (24.7%) said their stress levels had gotten better, 23.7% said their mental health had improved, and 24.7% said the same about their overall wellbeing.





### Objective 3

## Collaboration During the Pandemic



**“I think it depends on each person’s organization and where they’re at in their development and crisis in-house. You can only collaborate externally if things are good in your shop, right?”**

Both staff and stakeholder participants described how the pandemic led to increased collaboration across the city among different sectors and organizations. What was particularly interesting was how various shelters for youth increased their collaborative efforts during the pandemic. When the municipal government opened the emergency hotels in response to the pandemic, one in the downtown core was reserved for youth specifically. As such, youth from four different shelters were moved there. To create consistent programming for youth, the sites worked together to develop the necessary policies and procedures, which had never been done before.

Several participants pointed out that the agencies in the system often work with the same youth, and that increased collaboration would create a more seamless system of care for the youth. When asked what an ideal collaboration would look like, a few participants spoke about having a shared vision, mission and values, as well as an agreement on what they collectively want to achieve. Others spoke about building on the different agencies’ strengths and developing the system of care based on who has the capacity and expertise to provide different services. Finally, another suggestion was for youth shelters to do more joint advocacy to address the shared systemic barriers the youth face.

Staff participants also described numerous barriers that prevent the shelter system from collaborating more or operating as a system of care, the most frequent of which was a lack of resources. Despite all the Toronto shelters receiving some funding from the municipal government, they must fundraise for many of their program operations. This has historically created a situation in which agencies compete for the same funding pots. Participants stated that a funding model set up to fund system-wide services rather than any one organization is key to facilitating collaboration. Several participants also referred to the level of crisis that staff are contending with at their agencies and how this puts them into a perpetual state of having to “*put out fires*” rather than proactively creating collaborative strategies or participating in joint activities, even if this would ultimately improve the response to youth homelessness in Toronto.

## QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Staff were asked to complete the *Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory* (Mattessich, 2001), a standardized measure slightly adapted to assess how they perceive the collaboration across the youth homelessness sector in Toronto is fairing. When the results were scored, the vast majority of participants felt that the state of collaboration in Toronto was in a “borderline” position, meaning that while there was some communication and collaboration, work remains to be done. Twenty-eight percent felt that the state of collaboration was “very good”, and 2.2% were “concerned” about the state of collaboration. When the individual items were considered, 95.7% indicated that their organization would benefit from increased collaboration, and just over three-quarters (78.1%) felt that their role would be easier with increased collaboration. Moreover, while almost 90% either agreed or strongly agreed that they had a lot of respect for other people in similar organizations, only 15% indicated that youth workers at different organizations trust one another. Just under 80% agreed or strongly agreed that the time is “right” for increased collaboration. Taken together, it appears that most survey respondents felt that both they and the sector would benefit from increased collaboration. However, there is still some work to do to increase the level of collaboration and build trust.





## Objective 4

### Shifting to Prevention in Toronto

**“My sense is that the action plan or theory of change to end homelessness in Toronto needs to be refreshed or reoriented—starting from the point of ending youth homelessness. And I think that’s a shift again for a lot of people.”**

For several staff and stakeholder interview participants, the pandemic further highlighted the need to change how youth homelessness is addressed in Toronto, namely the current reliance on crowded emergency shelters. One of the most frequently discussed problems with the way youth homelessness is addressed in the city is that there is currently no youth-specific strategy, meaning youth are grouped together with everyone experiencing homelessness, which does not consider their unique developmental needs.

When staff and stakeholder participants were asked to discuss the best way to prevent youth homelessness, both upstream and to prevent recidivism, the most frequent response in both interviews and the surveys was to increase the supply of affordable housing and the number of rent subsidies available to youth. This was coupled with the need to increase young people’s access to income, either through direct income support or improved access to employment and post-secondary education. Participants spoke about providing more support to families, improving various systems (particularly the mental health system), working in partnership with schools, and providing more case management services in the community instead of shelters.

When asked to think about barriers to prevention, staff and stakeholders discussed how the homelessness system as it is currently designed is structured to respond to emergency situations, not prevent (or end) homelessness. The most frequent barriers identified were a lack of resources, political issues, the complexity of the issue, and a lack of collaboration and information sharing across the sector.

Youth interview participants were asked to think about services or supports that might have prevented them from entering shelter or could prevent youth homelessness in general. The most common responses from youth centred around help with housing or income, and about a third spoke about family support. A small number spoke about having more support provided in school, and about a quarter felt that youth homelessness was not something that could be prevented—primarily citing family issues they felt couldn’t be solved by programming or individual responsibility.

Youth survey respondents were also asked what services or interventions would have helped prevent their experiences of homelessness. When the ‘*very helpful*’ and ‘*helpful*’ responses were added together, the top three services that survey respondents felt would have been the most helpful was having housing workers, followed by having more money when leaving CAS or corrections, and then Housing First and Host Homes (worded as a program that connects me with people in the community that provides a place to stay). Half of the survey respondents indicated that mental health support would have been helpful, and 45.9% felt that family counselling and eviction prevention would have helped. Approximately 43% felt that services provided at their school or a community centre would have helped, and 40% indicated that legal support would have helped.

### YOUTH HOUSING PREFERENCES

Youth in both the interviews and surveys were also asked about their preferences for housing models. Among youth interview participants, the vast majority wanted their own unit, mainly subsidized. When youth were asked why they wanted their own place, it was generally described in terms of having a sense of independence and freedom. Only three young people chose the transitional, congregate site model. Where interview participants varied was in the amount of staff support they desired. Some youth wanted ongoing support from staff to provide guidance, while others felt that they had enough support in their lives through friends and family and therefore did not need additional support from staff.

Since the interviews with youth revealed differences among participants in terms of the degree of staff support they desired once they were housed, we separated the type of housing preference from the amount of staff support in the survey. Youth were asked which living arrangement they would prefer upon leaving the shelter/hotel. The majority of respondents once again indicated a preference to have their own apartment, mainly with a subsidy, with 56.9% choosing this option. Another 12.5% wanted their own apartment with no subsidy. Taken together, 69.4% would prefer to have their own apartment upon leaving the shelter or hotel. In contrast to the interviews, 25% of survey respondents preferred the congregate living, transitional housing model. An additional 5.6% chose “other”, which for two was returning to the family home, one was homeownership, and one a room in a basement.





## Conclusion

The findings of this study, coupled with the existing literature, strongly suggest that local agencies and government should develop a prevention-focused strategy for youth homelessness that emphasizes family work and providing school-based support, both upstream and for those newly homeless—particularly first-time shelter users. These supports should focus on keeping youth in their homes or with other family members (however they define family) whenever possible and safe to do so and work to keep young people engaged in school. For those young people for whom this is not possible, a Housing-First approach, where youth can choose (within reason) their type of accommodation and level of support provided is both what the majority of youth prefer, and what the evidence indicates is effective in stabilizing their housing situation. As the majority of youth experiencing homelessness have not had the chance to complete their secondary education or gain sufficient work experience, they will need support to afford the high costs of rent in cities like Toronto. This means either providing a portable housing subsidy that is tied to the young person (and hence permits them to move if necessary) or a rent-geared-to-income unit, either through the municipal government or a non-profit organization/developer. For youth that choose to have continued staff support, ongoing youth-led case management supports (or ‘coaching’) should be provided in the community, geared to the needs and preferences of the young person. The pandemic can serve as an opportunity or an impetus to do things differently. We have an unprecedented opportunity to use the negative impacts of the pandemic, and the necessary shifts in practice, as a chance to change the status quo and change the way youth homelessness is addressed in Toronto and beyond.

