

# BUILDING COMMUNITY: SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR YOUNG MOTHERS

Jeff KARABANOW & Jean HUGHES

## What do you need to know?

Motherhood during adolescence carries its own set of challenges for those who are homeless including physical and mental health problems, risk of abuse, and suicidal behaviour. Teen pregnancy also carries higher risks for the newborns such as birth complications, and physical, neurological, and nutritional problems. Very little attention has been directed toward understanding the particular needs of homeless mothers. They are marginalized by society, not well supported by the service sector and are generally left to fend for themselves. Teen motherhood is generally portrayed negatively, as a 'problem' that must be 'dealt with'. Some researchers, however, have reframed the issue to address the populations' strengths, struggles and challenges. Some findings suggest that early motherhood may not be directly responsible for negative outcomes such as poverty or low educational attainment. Instead, poor outcomes could result from a lack of resources and supports available to young mothers. One useful resource is supportive housing, which has been defined as a midpoint between institutional and independent living. Residents are offered long-term housing while being provided with the necessary services and supports.

## What did the researchers do?

A case-study was conducted at SHYM, which included in-depth interviews with the young mothers and staff and board members who are intimately familiar with the housing development. Two rounds of in-depth interviews were conducted six months apart with 10 tenants of SHYM. Tenants also completed

the World Health Organization Quality of Life Survey (WHOQOL-BREF) during each interview session. The researchers explored the staff and Board members' experiences working at/with SHYM, as well as their perspectives on the development and evolution of the non-profit organization.

## WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?



This research uncovers the experience of young mothers living in a supportive housing initiative in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia called Supportive Housing for Young Mothers (SHYM). SHYM is a free-standing, detached unit with 12 independent, furnished bedrooms for women between the ages of 16-21, along with their children. This research uses a case study approach to explore how tenants experienced SHYM, their quality of life, feelings of self-worth, and hopes for the future. This research also explores the development and evolution of SHYM.

## ARTICLE SOURCE

Karabanow, J., & Hughes, J. (2013). Building Community: Supportive Housing for Young Mothers. In Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., Buccieri, K., Karabanow, J., & Marsolais, A. (Eds.), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice* (111-130). Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

# What did the researchers find?

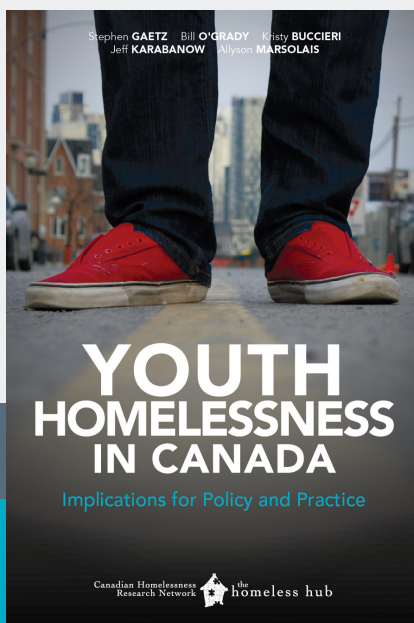
SHYM was found to be successful in several critical ways. It provided safe housing for mothers and their children, which allowed them both to remain together and to thrive. Residents were removed from the dangers of homelessness and/or abuse, in addition to being provided with an environment of support (emotional, structural, and financial), encouragement, and educational resources. Residents were also assisted in developing valuable life skills and goals for the future. Participants reported an appreciation for the community and friendship available at SHYM with other residents and staff (although some internal conflicts were reported), as well as for a stigma-free community. A number of mothers reported a dramatic reduction in their stress and that of their child since living at SHYM. Various challenges were also reported, particularly with regard to the tension many tenants experienced from independence and the help they received to support their children. This was particularly true with regard to the rules governing SHYM, as well as the various programs residents were required to attend. Second interviews were completed with 7 out of the 10 young mothers. Five were still living at SHYM, and 2 were living on their own. Many experienced positive changes including greater stability, which they directly associated with SHYM. Five of the 7 tenants reported at least some positive changes in their lives, while two reported only negative changes. Two tenants originally expressed negative feelings toward SHYM, but grew more positive over time.

## How can you use this research?

This research can be used by service providers and policy makers as it provides several 'lessons from the field'. Providing safe and affordable housing with meaningful programs/supports is an extremely powerful and efficient approach to helping marginalized populations (such as young, homeless mothers) build the resilience neces-

sary to overcome adversity and re-enter the mainstream culture with skills, confidence, and resources necessary to succeed in life. The research points to the need for a committed steering group, and for programs to be built on an understanding of the policies that dictate the internal operations of non-governmental organizations. Staff and steering committee members should develop an understanding of the tenant population, and stay true to the project mission and vision. Finally, it is argued that the 'messiness', nuances and complexity of grassroots, com-

munity-based initiatives should be celebrated. Several recommendations are made in this report, including the need for sustainable, supportive housing for young mothers. This housing should include a variety of tailored, relevant, accessible programs both on and off-site that are strength-based, focus on development of life skills, self-esteem and future goals. It should provide on-going supports and build trusted partnerships between staff and residents, and find a balance between the young women's need for purposeful routine and their desire for autonomy.



## About the researchers



JEFF KARABANOW is a professor of Social Work at Dalhousie University in the Faculty of Health Professions. He has worked with homeless young people in Toronto, Montreal, Halifax and Guatemala and has published numerous academic articles and created several documentaries about housing stability, service delivery systems, street health, and homeless youth culture.

This free e-book is available at:

[www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessness](http://www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessness)