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“I want purpose in my life”: A qualitative exploration of how homeless youth envision their futures

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ABSTRACT

Preparing for the future is a major developmental task during adolescence and early adulthood. However, youth experiencing homelessness face additional challenges relating to economic instability, housing insecurity, and a lack of social support. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 38 youth, from Ottawa and Toronto, who were experiencing homelessness and participating in a randomized controlled trial of Housing First for Youth (HF4Y). This qualitative study explores youths' visions for the future, including their goals, aspirations, plans, and barriers to achieving them. Overall, findings demonstrated that youth had positive visions of the future and strove to reach developmentally appropriate goals and responsibilities. Compared to youth receiving HF4Y, the future expectations of those receiving treatment as usual (TAU) were characterized by uncertainty and lacked clear direction. Additionally, they emphasized self-reliance and autonomy, while HF4Y prioritized forming relationships and reconnection. Findings highlight the importance of stable housing intervention, and social, community, and financial support in planning for the future and transitioning out of homelessness. Implications for intervention, directions for future research, and limitations are provided.

KEYWORDS

Future expectations; housing first for youth; qualitative; youth homelessness

In Western societies, youth typically participate in a variety of experiences in both formal (e.g., educational institutions) and informal settings (e.g., extracurricular activities) that prepare them for the roles and responsibilities of adulthood (Arnett, 2007; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017). These experiences provide the foundation for the development of future expectations (i.e., goals, aspirations, and plans) which are linked to positive psychosocial outcomes and can serve as a buffer against negative outcomes (Beal &

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Crockett, 2010; Kirk et al., 2011; McCabe & Barnett, 2000; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2008; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2022). While there is a plethora of research examining future expectations among youth in the general population, there is considerably less on the subpopulation of youth experiencing homelessness, whose development is challenged by economic instability, housing insecurity, a lack of social support, and limited opportunities for exploration (Raffaelli & Koller, 2005; Sulimani-Aidan, 2017). In particular, a greater understanding of how housing stability, or a lack thereof, may influence youths' visions of the future is needed.

In Canada and the United States, youth account for approximately 20% of the homeless population (Duchesne et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2021), with over 40% of currently homeless youth in Canada and approximately 33% in the United States reporting that their first experience of homelessness was at or before the age of 16 (Gaetz et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2018). Notably, 50% of the broader homeless population in Canada and the United States report first experiencing homelessness before the age of 24 (Government of Canada, 2022; Henry et al., 2021; Morton et al., 2018). In the absence of positive support from adults, participation in protective environments, and personal life skills and experiences, homeless youth require significant additional support to manage the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive changes associated with the transition into adulthood (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016).

Researchers who have focused on the future expectations of youth aging out of or leaving foster care have found that they tend to prioritize hopes pertaining to relationships, including finding a life partner and good friends, and that having these expectations serves as a source of resilience (Sulimani-Aidan, 2015, 2017; Sulimani-Aidan & Benbenishty, 2011; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2022). Further, in comparison to middle-class youth who tend to focus more on educational and leisure goals, researchers have found that youth who grew up in poverty tend to emphasize the importance of occupational goals and tend to have lower or more modest expectations regarding educational achievements and mental health (Nurmi, 1991; Sulimani-Aidan, 2015; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017). Unsurprisingly, research suggests that homelessness, poverty, and household dysfunction can interfere with youths' life plans and the realization of their future expectations (Klein & Shoshana, 2020; Nurmi, 1991; Raffaelli & Koller, 2005; Tucker et al., 2017). For example, Raffaelli & Koller (2005) explored the future expectations of homeless youth and found that although they had developmentally appropriate hopes about work, education, and family, there was a mismatch between their hopes and expectations. In other words, they did not believe in their ability to actualize these expectations, likely because they lacked the stability and supports necessary

to do so. Similarly, several studies looking at outcomes among adults participating in Housing First interventions found that even though they had well-defined hopes for the future and their recovery, becoming housed was crucial for realizing them (Kirst et al., 2014; Tsemberis et al., 2012). This suggests that housing stability is critical for fostering optimism about the future and turning these expectations into reality. However, research suggests that youth need more significant supports (e.g., relating to well-being, employment, education and social inclusion), in addition to the provision of stable housing, in order to realize future expectations and sustainable exits from homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2019; Karabanow et al., 2016).

Given the role that expectations about the future seems to play in facilitating optimism, it is important to explore how youth experiencing homelessness describe their futures and whether having stable housing influences their expectations. Further, because youth experiencing homelessness are simultaneously undergoing significant developmental changes, it is critical to gain an understanding of how visions of the future may differ for youth who have stable housing versus those who do not. Understanding these differences can support interventions that assist youth in exiting homelessness, like Housing First for Youth (HF4Y), and provide insight into their developmental trajectories. We will focus on comparing visions of the future for youth receiving HF4Y versus those receiving Treatment as usual (TAU) which will contribute to an improved understanding of how housing stability may influence perceptions of the future.

Participants for the current study were a subsample of youth involved in larger federally funded, mixed methods, randomized controlled trial (RCT) of HF4Y conducted by Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab (MtS). MtS is co-led by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness at York University and A Way Home Canada. This RCT started in 2017 and aimed to implement and evaluate HF4Y and compare it to youth receiving TAU in two demonstration sites, Ottawa and Toronto (Gaetz et al., 2023). The Ottawa site recruited youth who were currently experiencing homelessness, including those living in a shelter, couch surfing, or sleeping rough. Whereas the Toronto site recruited youth who were experiencing or at-risk of experiencing homelessness and had crown ward ship status. Although findings from this larger study have not been published yet, a protocol paper detailing the methodology is available (see Gaetz et al., 2023).

Housing First programs are rooted in the belief that everyone has a right to adequate housing and that individuals are better able to move forward with their lives if they are first housed (Aubry et al., 2015, 2016; Gaetz, 2014a; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). Housing First has a strong evidence base and has proved to be highly effective in addressing the housing needs

of chronically homeless adults, particularly those with significant mental health and substance abuse problems (Aubry et al., 2016; Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). HF4Y is a recent adaptation of the well-established adult Housing First model but is based on the understanding that the causes and conditions of youth homelessness are distinct from adult homelessness, and therefore, the intervention must be youth focused (Gaetz, 2014a, 2014b; Gaetz et al., 2021). According to the program model (see Gaetz et al., 2021), the principles of HF4Y include (1) a right to housing with no pre-conditions (e.g., sobriety or abstinence), (2) youth choice, voice, and self-determination in their selection of housing and supports, (3) positive youth development and wellness orientation that supports recovery, (4) individualized client-centered supports (provided by a case worker), and (5) social inclusion and community integration. In contrast, participants receiving TAU continued to navigate their housing situations as they had been prior to receiving an invitation to participate in the study. This means that they continued to receive any pre-existing supports that they had in place and/or had access to services that they encountered in the community.

Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study explored youths' visions for the future. Two research questions guided this study: (1) How do youth experiencing homelessness envision their futures? And (2) Are visions of the future different for participants receiving HF4Y versus those receiving TAU?

Methods

Participants

Participants for the larger RCT were recruited between February 2018 and March 2020 from the community of young people using the services of the youth homelessness system and associated sectors (e.g., child protection, youth mental health and addictions, enforcement and corrections, and education). Purposive sampling was used to ensure the representativeness of priority youth populations, including racial minorities and youth who identified as LGBTQ2S+. All RCT participants were between the ages of 17 and 24 at the time of recruitment and were experiencing homelessness, including being at risk of homelessness or living in precarious housing, in Ottawa or Toronto. A total of 148 participants were randomized to either the intervention group, receiving HF4Y services ($n=73$), or the control group, receiving TAU services ($n=75$). A subset of participants, who were sampled from the larger RCT study by selecting an equal number of youth from each site and condition, was invited to complete a qualitative baseline interview ($n=38$). All participants provided written, informed consent

upon entry and the study was approved by the Office of Research Ethics at York University (certificate #2017-382).

Participants who were randomized to the intervention group received housing and support based on the HF4Y principles, as described in the introduction of this paper, including a housing subsidy and a specialized case worker for the duration of the study (i.e., four years; Gaetz et al., 2021, 2023). They were offered housing from a range of options (e.g., in the private rental market or through public housing where available, in some cases even transitional housing) with no treatment preconditions and were assigned a case worker who provided client-driven support options related to housing retention, well-being, income and employment, education, social inclusion, and complementary supports, including peer support. The participants randomized to TAU had access to the regular housing programs and services available to young people in their respective communities, such as income support, drop-ins, health/mental health clinics, emergency shelters, and potentially transitional housing or longer-term housing initiatives. A more detailed description of the larger study is provided in the RCT protocol paper by Gaetz et al. (2023).

Thirty-eight youth, who comprise the sample for the current study, agreed to participate in the baseline narrative interview, 18 of whom were from the HF4Y group (Ottawa $n=10$, Toronto $n=8$), and 20 were from the TAU group (Ottawa $n=12$; Toronto $n=8$). Purposive sampling was used to ensure balance in demographic variables, including age, gender identity, and ethno-racial background. Participant demographics are shown in [Table 1](#).

At the time of the baseline interview, 12 youth receiving HF4Y were stably housed. Of the remaining six, one HF4Y participant lived in a group home and considered themselves “technically stably housed”, while the other five were not stably housed and were couch surfing at temporary residences for financial reasons (i.e., they could not afford to pay the subsidized rent and the cost of living). Five youth receiving TAU from the Ottawa demonstration site were stably housed, living with roommates or in their own apartment. The remaining 15 youth receiving TAU were not stably housed. Their living situations varied from being unsheltered, living in emergency shelters, group homes, or provisionally living with family or friends.

Interview procedure

The semi-structured qualitative interviews with youth were conducted by trained research assistants six months after enrollment into the RCT study between June 2018 and June 2020 (i.e., baseline). All participants provided informed consent and agreed to have the interviews audio recorded. Interviews conducted before March 2020 took place in-person at social

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample ($N = 38$).

Characteristics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	HF4Y		TAU	
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	19.84	1.89	19.61	1.79	20.11	2.11
Age of first experience of homelessness	17.25	2.81	17.64	2.9	16.97	2.82
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
City						
Ottawa	22	57.89	10	55.55	12	60
Toronto	16	42.1	8	44.44	8	40
Gender						
Cis-gender Man	17	44.7	10	55.55	7	35
Cis-gender Woman	15	39.47	6	33.33	9	45
Transgender Man	4	10.52	1	5.55	3	15
Transgender Woman	1	2.63	1	5.55	–	–
Non-Binary	1	2.63	–	–	1	5
Sexuality						
Heterosexual	21	55.26	12	66.66	9	45
LGBTQ2S+	17	44.73	6	33.33	11	55
Race/Ethnicity						
Caucasian	13	34.21	4	22.22	9	45
Black	10	26.31	8	44.44	2	10
Indigenous	3	7.89	1	5.55	2	10
Mixed Race	8	21.05	3	16.66	5	25
Latin American	2	5.26	2	11.11	–	–
Southeast Asian	2	5.26	–	–	2	10

Note. $n_{HF4Y} = 18$; $n_{TAU} = 20$.

service agency offices and participants were required to give a physical signature to indicate their understanding and agreement to participate, as per the informed consent process. However, in response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, all in-person interviews were discontinued, and the study transitioned to conducting interviews exclusively via telephone. The decision to shift from in-person to telephone interviews was guided by university-wide directives mandated by the Institutional Research Ethics Board (IREB; York University) at the onset of the pandemic. In accordance with these changes, the informed consent procedures were adjusted accordingly. For interviews conducted via telephone after March 2020, a verbal consent process was implemented. A detailed script outlining the informed consent process for telephone interviews was developed, submitted to the IREB, and subsequently approved.

On average, the interviews took 90 minutes to complete. They explored outcomes including housing retention and stability, physical health, mental health, well-being, substance use, school engagement, life skills, and employment. The questions in the baseline semi-structured interview protocol were divided into three-time points or domains: past experiences and pathways into homelessness, current experiences, and visions for the future. The present study focused primarily on data from the third time point that explored visions for life in the future, including personal goals, and ideal housing and supports. Specifically, youth were asked: (1) What would be necessary to help you achieve your goals? (2) Do you feel like you have the supports in your life to

help you achieve them? (3) What would your housing situation look like? and (4) Is there any kind of support you are not currently receiving that would help you in obtaining or maintaining housing? Additionally, two follow up questions were asked if youth were receiving HF4Y and/or indicated that they had already been stably housed: (5) What do you think of the Housing First for Youth project that you are or will be involved with? and (6) How has housing stability impacted your life?

Data analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Prior to coding, all interview transcripts were blinded so that the researchers did not know the participants' treatment conditions (i.e., HF4Y or TAU). Using an abductive approach, we conducted a thematic analysis guided by recommendations from Miles et al., (2018) and Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was selected as it is an iterative method for exploring, identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns and themes within the data in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was coded in NVivo (Release 1.0), a qualitative data analysis software.

In the first cycle of coding, four interview transcripts were reviewed line-by-line by authors MW, SMM, AD, CM, and VR, using in-vivo coding with visions of the future coded generally as positive, negative, or mixed. As coding progressed, other codes were added to reflect relevant areas of interest (e.g., barriers, facilitators, goal planning). All five researchers coded the same four transcripts until no further changes were made to the coding framework. When the coding framework was solidified, a second cycle of coding began during which all interviews were coded by a primary coder and then reviewed by a second member of the research team to ensure completeness, consistency, and accuracy.

Following coding, interviews were unblinded, and the treatment groups were revealed. Coded data was then entered into an analytic matrix where each participant was represented as a row, and each central theme (e.g., vision of the future/goals, ideal housing, future relationships) was a column. The matrix was populated by MW and AD, and once it was complete, it was reviewed by another member of the team, SMM. The result of this process was a detailed summary of the complete descriptive coding of each participant's interview and a cross-case summary of all participants' interviews.

Results

Results are organized based on major themes that were identified in the thematic analysis. When describing their visions for the future, youth

tended to discuss goals and aspirations in the areas of education, work, housing, relationships and social support, in addition to identifying supports that would facilitate their future expectations and barriers that stand in their way. Each of these themes and findings are expanded on below.

“I want purpose in my life”: visions of the future

Across both conditions and demonstration sites, the majority of youth had positive visions of the future, including optimistic goals, hopes, and aspirations. For example, one youth receiving HF4Y in Ottawa said: “I see myself having a job, having a family, being happy ... you know, just living a quiet, normal, suburban lifestyle.” Further, youth tended to describe multiple dreams and goals, suggesting that they felt as though they had options, and that the future was full of opportunity with one TAU participant in Ottawa indicating that they: “view [their] future as very bright ... [they] have a lot of ambitions, a lot of dreams, a lot of goals that [they] want to achieve. [They are] not settling for less.” Specifically, youth discussed goals and dreams relating to starting or continuing education, pursuing careers, owning homes, and having families:

“I’d like to go to university, start my career, I’d like to be responsible, probably own a good home, good family, no drama, like to own a Tesla, like to have a cottage. I’d like to build my own future; I don’t want to make excuses I’d regret. I want to be proud of myself.” (TAU participant)

Although the content of youths’ goals and aspirations were similar across conditions, youth receiving HF4Y tended to have more concrete, short and long-term plans in place for how they were going to achieve their goals and have their future expectations come to fruition:

“So short term, say like four years from now, I want to go back to driving school to get my G2. I want to get a car, and by the time I get a car, I want to be graduated from my [Bachelor of Social Work], and I want to start working in the field of social work while going back and doing my [Masters of Social Work]. Long term, I just want to like continue working – getting experience in social work, hopefully like clinical social work.”

Whereas youth receiving TAU seemed to have a general sense of what they wanted their futures to look like but had no concrete steps or plans for how they might achieve this. For example, one youth receiving TAU from Toronto said: “I don’t really know specifically what I want to do, but I just want to do something, and I want to finish school sometime so I can get a good job, go to college.” Further, the majority of youth receiving TAU (who remained unstably housed) expressed a fear of the unknown and a sense of uncertainty regarding the future: “The toughest thing is just the fear of the unknown, like where you’re going to be in like ... a couple

of days, or even a month down the road.” This seems to indicate that youth receiving TAU lacked the opportunity to envision the long-term future due to a preoccupation with figuring out the immediate future and overcoming daily hassles, such as worrying about: “What am I going to eat? Where am I going to go? How am I getting to school? How am I going to work?” Youth receiving TAU also tended to place more of an emphasis on the need for stability in their lives: “Honestly, like my number one goal is stability. Like a career, home, regular routine. Like that’s my like, dream” suggesting that perhaps they were not yet in a stable enough place to begin planning for their futures.

However, it is worth noting that several youth receiving TAU emphasized the importance of finding employment that they consider meaningful so they can give back to their communities: “I want to be a help to someone. I want to help a cause.” One youth discussed their desire to help others who are dealing with experiences similar to theirs and provide non-judgmental support:

“I want to do something that helps troubled youth. Like that’s always what I wanted to do, like help people that went through stuff like me because I know how it feels to feel like people don’t understand you and are going to judge and stuff like that. So, I want to be in something in that category.”

“Home is family to me, so I don’t really care about the specifics of where I live”: envisioning future housing

Youth also discussed their ideal visions for future housing. Some youth receiving HF4Y discussed housing ideals in terms of location and size: “I definitely would like to live in a more rural area. Ideally, my perfect house would be in [British Columbia] by the rainforests with a large property so that I can have dogs.” However, the majority seemed unconcerned about the specifics of what their housing would look like or where it would be. Instead, they focused on describing what ‘home’ means to them regarding who they want to live with and the abstract qualities that would make it an ideal home: “I want to be able to feel safe and comfortable in my home environment. That’s a big one. And I guess I want to feel like I belong where I am.” More specifically, youth receiving HF4Y, particularly those in Ottawa, expressed a desire for qualities including safety, independence, comfort, and the freedom to do as they please: “Having a place to draw, a place to do my music, and a place to do art stuff and just to be able to sleep in my own comfy bed ... That would be an ideal home,” and ultimately highlighted the desire to have something of their own so that they can “[...] finally say, this is mine. It’s my space.” While youth receiving HF4Y in Toronto also touched on the aforementioned qualities, they placed

more of an emphasis on affordability: “Probably just an apartment somewhere so I can save up money, figure out my situation on my own,” and stability “I wouldn’t care if it was a bachelor, a five-bedroom, a one bedroom, it doesn’t matter. As long as I’m stable.”

Youth receiving TAU described their ideal housing similarly to youth receiving HF4Y, touching on abstract housing qualities that would give a home meaning. However, in comparison to HF4Y participants, their housing ideals were variable. They reflected more uncertainty, with some even noting that they had not given it much thought: “Honestly, I haven’t really thought about it because all I ever knew was unstable housing, that’s just kind of like, the norm to me,” suggesting that stable housing may be necessary in order to think and plan for the future. In support of this, one TAU participant said that they “feel like finding stable housing is a big step” in being able to achieve their dreams.

“[I] just wanna have and maintain healthy relationships”: future relationships and social support

The level of importance and context in which future relationships and social support were discussed varied across conditions and demonstration sites. Youth from Ottawa receiving HF4Y discussed social support in reference to the people with whom they wanted to share their future life and home. For some participants, this meant repairing past relationships that have been damaged: “I would like to grow my relationships again. I’ve kicked a lot of people out, and I need to fix that. And rebuild some of those relationships that I’ve kind of abandoned,” while for others, this meant building new relationships and eventually starting a family: “I’d like to start dating someone ... I do want a kid. I want to pass on my legacy.” Overall, it seemed as though HF4Y participants prioritized establishing healthy relationships and families above all else: “It’s pretty simple. Just having a family and kids, and I don’t really care so much about a career; it’s just a means to an end. I wouldn’t prioritize that over family.”

Ottawa youth receiving TAU discussed social support in the context of hoping that their relationships would work out but seemed to be more passive in comparison to those receiving HF4Y and prioritized autonomy and self-reliance:

“People come, people go. You really have to focus on yourself, right? So that’s all I really worry about. I hope I have the same, or most of the same, relationships if it works out. And I hope me and my boyfriend stay together and go and get married, but like if it doesn’t work out, [then] it doesn’t work out.”

Youth across both conditions in Toronto focused much less on future relationships and social support than the youth from Ottawa. However, a

few participants discussed social support in the context of connections they are seeking or missing in their lives, such as the guidance of a trusted adult (e.g., parent, case worker, or mentor). Similar to Ottawa TAU participants, they seemed to have a passive view of relationships and emphasized the need for autonomy and self-reliance:

“I could rely on [my partner] for maybe emotional support, but life support, you have to hold yourself up in your life. You can have these people, like a worker, for example, to support you in finding something like to get a doctor, but when it comes to yourself and your physical being, at the end of the day, you’re there by yourself. It’s you and you only.”(TAU participant)

“More money would be nice...”: barriers to goal achievement

Another theme identified was the various barriers that stand in the way of youth achieving their goals. Unsurprisingly, many of the youth, particularly those receiving TAU and those receiving HF4Y who remained unstably housed, indicated that housing instability significantly impacted their ability to plan for the future:

“I think the whole issue is if I had a steady place to live, like my own apartment, getting through school and then college and then planning for the future would be so much more achievable. The problem with that is that there is a housing crisis, and my income does not really solve rent problems.”(TAU participant)

This suggests that stable housing is a prerequisite for planning for the future and that youth view education as essential to facilitating their goals.

Alongside housing instability, a lack of financial resources was identified as one of the most significant barriers to goal achievement and obtaining and maintaining housing, with almost all youth across both conditions and demonstration sites indicating that the cost of rent, in addition to the cost of living was hindering their ability to move forward with their goals:

“To be honest, like just money. That’s the only thing I’m really struggling with at this time in my life because I don’t have a career yet or anything or like a solid income that’s enough for housing and stuff now [...] I need to have two bedrooms for having a kid too and then first and last month’s rent and then furniture and then all the extra shit, like groceries, bills, like [if] there’s a medical emergency or something like that. Like without money, it makes shit really hard.”(TAU participant)

In response to financial concerns, youth highlighted a need for knowledge and support when it comes to budgeting and saving, noting that it may be crucial to their future success:

“Something that I’ve kind of put in place for myself for success is to talk to my primary worker about budgeting... I can’t just keep on spending madly and then expect some different outcome, so she’s been really holding me accountable with like monetary goals that I have.”(TAU participant)

Additionally, it seemed as though many youth, especially those receiving HF4Y, prioritized saving and finding a steady source of income and employment to combat financial obstacles: “This summer I have to get a job no matter what. I want to get a job, and I actually wanna keep it for a long time so that I can, like save some money for the future.”

In summary, youth across both conditions had positive visions of the future including multiple ambitious goals pertaining to their ideal housing, employment, education and relationships. However, most acknowledged that there are significant barriers, including a lack of stability (for those who remained unstably housed) and financial resources, that they will have to overcome to create the lives that they envision. Although there were similarities across conditions, important differences were observed when it came to long-term planning, goal setting, and envisioning future housing and relationships. In other words, even though youth receiving TAU generally had positive visions of the future, their plans lacked clear direction, specificity, and were characterized by uncertainty and self-reliance compared to HF4Y.

Discussion

The findings from this study contribute to an improved understanding of how youth experiencing homelessness envision their futures and the role of HF4Y and stable housing in developing these visions. Consistent with past research that has explored the content of marginalized youths’ future expectations, participants in this study approached the future with optimism and expressed a desire to attain many of the goals and responsibilities typically associated with the transition to adulthood, including pursuing education and employment, relationships and family planning, and having a place to call their own (Arnett, 2016; Karabanow, 2008; Miller & Bowen, 2020; Raffaelli & Koller, 2005; Sulimani-Aidan, 2017). For example, Karabanow (2008) found that even though youth experiencing homelessness considered their lives to be chaotic, stressful, and unhealthy, they all shared a hope for a brighter future. While it should not be overlooked that some youth in the current study, particularly those receiving TAU, expressed uncertainty and fears about the future, there were strong themes of hope, resilience, and developmental normality resounding from the interviews. Thus, it seems that having expectations about the future fostered a sense of hope and allowed youth to persevere in the face of adversity. This finding corresponds with previous research that has found that future expectations are a source of resilience for youth at-risk of experiencing homelessness (Sulimani-Aidan, 2017).

In comparison to youth in the general population, the subpopulation of youth experiencing homelessness must overcome many barriers, making it much more difficult for them to plan for the future and achieve goals. These challenges seemed to be amplified for youth who remained unstably housed and did not have individualized supports. According to the core principles of the HF4Y model, youth will be better positioned to build their futures if they are first housed (Gaetz, 2014a; Gaetz et al., 2021). In line with this, youth in this study who were stably housed had clear short and long-term goals and had begun to take the practical steps needed to accomplish them. Whereas those who were not, indicated that they did not feel as though they were at a place where they could plan for much beyond their immediate future and having their basic needs met. The findings showed that stable housing positively influenced youths' expectations of the future and fostered goal setting, personal agency, and self-determination. Similarly, studies by Karabanow (2008), Karabanow et al. (2016), have found that housing stability empowered youth who were transitioning out of homelessness to reflect on their futures, envision control over their lives, and develop long-term plans.

The finding that youth from the Ottawa demonstration site attributed a greater level of importance to rebuilding old relationships or forming new ones, than did youth across both conditions from Toronto, may be explained by contextual differences between the locations of the sites. More specifically, youth from Ottawa were currently experiencing homelessness, whereas youth from Toronto were aging out of foster care. The relationships and social support of the latter have likely been more transient and unstable throughout their lives due to being in foster care which may have resulted in a lack of trust or desire for rebuilding relationships (Bender et al., 2015). Nevertheless, youth from Ottawa, particularly those receiving HF4Y, discussed the importance of connecting or re-connecting with trusted adults, romantic partners, friends, and family members. Perhaps suggesting that HF4Y renewed a sense of hope about the prospect of future relationships and empowered youth to pursue or reclaim them. This aligns with HF4Y's principle of social inclusion and community integration which seeks to strengthen youths' relationships with family and other natural supports. While professional supports are transformative for many youth, it is essential to build lasting community relationships so that this is not their sole source of support (Thulien et al., 2023). In support of this, several studies have found that rebuilding natural support and community networks are likely to have positive benefits, including higher rates of self-esteem (Gaetz et al., 2016), increased mental health recovery (Manoni-Millar et al., 2023), reduced engagement in risky behavior (e.g., substance use; Morton & Chrisler, 2019) and higher levels of psychological integration in the community (Thulien et al., 2022).

Finally, youth identified a lack of financial means as the main barrier standing in the way of being able to achieve their future goals and exit homelessness, with almost all youth noting that the cost of living serves as a significant and ongoing source of stress. However, youth receiving HF4Y were more likely to have stable housing and consequently, their focus was on describing the plans for maintaining financial stability (e.g., going back to school, working, and saving money). Additionally, youth who remained unstably housed (i.e., primarily TAU), identified housing instability as a significant barrier to future planning and achieving their educational and occupational goals. This finding is supported by previous research that has found that the most significant changes to youths' well-being and perceptions of the future came from gaining employment after being stably housed (Karabanow, 2008). The HF4Y model is designed to address this barrier by promoting positive youth development and wellness orientation, including the provision of housing and supports to build confidence, health, and resilience and ensuring a range of opportunities (i.e., vocational, educational, and employment).

Implications for prevention and intervention

In light of the extensive challenges youth experiencing homelessness face, interventions must support youth in maintaining optimism, planning for their futures, achieving their goals, and exiting homelessness. The findings from this study highlight the importance of safe, affordable, and permanent housing without preconditions (Gaetz et al., 2021).

It is imperative to highlight the critical period for intervention to help prevent chronic and long-term homelessness among youth. In comparison to adults experiencing homelessness, who tend to have less hopeful expectations for the future due to chronic homelessness, youth in this study expressed a sense of hope and a desire to attain developmentally appropriate roles and responsibilities in their communities (Kirst et al., 2014; Miller & Bowen, 2020). However, according to research by Kidd et al. (2016), this sense of hope about the future tends to decline quickly over time, with youth reporting a significant decrease after one year of experiencing homelessness. This finding is also consistent with developmental literature in this area, specifically the theory of emerging adulthood, which posits that during this stage of life young people have the greatest opportunity to change their lives in a positive direction and the highest hopes and expectations about the future (Arnett, 2000). Taken together, these findings suggests that it is important to intervene as early as possible for youth to realize their hopes, promote healthy development, and prevent long term homelessness.

Further, Kidd and Evans (2011) found that, for youth experiencing homelessness, the concept of home is a multidimensional continuum that ranges from home as a place (e.g., a physical structure or dwelling) on one end and home as a state of mind (e.g., comprised of one's friends, partners, and in some cases, future children) on the other. They emphasize that youth who defined home as a state of mind tended to be those who had spent a prolonged period living in homelessness. While youth in this study who were stably housed and receiving HF4Y envisioned home as a physical space that would meet their basic needs (i.e., safety, stability, comfort, independence), youth receiving TAU expressed uncertainty and, in some cases, an inability to envision ideal housing due to prolonged instability. In this context, it is important to emphasize the timely delivery of stable housing that meets the needs of youth.

Limitations and directions for future research

Limitations of this study reflect the challenges of conducting qualitative research on a hard-to-reach population. While this study was conducted in two Canadian cities that varied in size, services, and affordability, it is possible that the results are not representative of the experiences of youth in areas with differing political and economic realities. As such, future research should prioritize directly or conceptually replicating this study to determine if the results can be generalized across multiple contexts. Another limitation worth noting is that these findings are based on the narratives and experiences of youth at one point in time. It is recommended that future research examines the future expectations of youth experiencing homelessness using a longitudinal design to determine whether they are realizing their hopes and achieving their goals. Ideally, this would be done in the context of a HF4Y intervention given its novelty and the dearth of outcome studies. Additionally, the data for this study was collected as part of a HF4Y RCT and because of the project's large scale, multiple research assistants were required to conduct the interviews across both demonstration sites. While the interviews offered rich insight, it cannot be confirmed if youth received the same extent of prompts when responding to questions. Finally, this study's analysis involved several steps, including multiple coders and coding cycles, in-depth summaries of interviews, and cross-case matrices that all researchers reviewed to enhance the rigor. Despite the actions taken, it must be acknowledged that the findings are not assumed to be free of researcher bias or fully capture the complexity of the experiences of homelessness and how it may influence youths' visions for the futures.

This research contributes to an improved understanding of how youth experiencing homelessness or housing precarity envision their futures and

provides insight into their developmental trajectories. Moreover, it provides support for the positive impact of stable housing and HF4Y in planning for the future.

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