MAKING THE SHIFT
youth homelessness demonstration lab

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION
Community of Practice

RESEARCH BRIEF #2 –
Support Systems for Youth: How to Maximize Youth's Networks in Prevention Efforts

WHY IT MATTERS

For youth at risk of homelessness, social network characteristics are an important determinant of social and health experiences and outcomes – both in positive and detrimental ways. Studies examining youth at-risk of homelessness have shown that the individuals comprising youth's social networks can influence motivations to seek and access support services (e.g., Anamika Barman-Adhikari & Rice, 2014); experience social and health adversities (e.g., Begun et al., 2016; Begun et al., 2020; Slesnick et al., 2021); and influence resiliency (e.g., Kidd & Shahar, 2010). In the effort to prevent homelessness for youth at risk, therefore, it is important to understand how youth's network composition and engagement can support or harm their trajectories and what can be done to strengthen positive connections.

OBJECTIVES

While ***family and natural supports*** can be critical supports for youth at-risk of homelessness, it is not always an option that is safe, appropriate, available or preferred, based on a range of unique and personal circumstances. Youth might choose to engage with individuals within their networks in different ways for various reasons, such as emotional vs. practical support. As well, positive or harmful influences might be imposed on them. This brief aims to shed light on the ways in which youth tend to interact with their networks and provide frontline practitioners with strategies to support youth in engaging with individuals who will help them to thrive.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Social networks, **social capital** and **social connectedness** are terms that are used in studies on youth homelessness to describe the relationships that enable or hinder positive opportunities and outcomes for youth. Research shows the diversity and variability of social networks of homeless and at-risk youth, including shifting

CONSIDERATIONS

✱ **Social network composition for youth at-risk of homelessness can include individuals such as immediate and extended family (defined broadly), peers (such as home-based and street-involved) and natural supports such as case workers and teachers.**

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A WAY HOME VERS UN CHEZ-SOI CANADA

relations with family, street and home-based peers, sexual partners and service providers (e.g., de la Haye, 2012; Tyler & Melander, 2011; Rice, 2010). The composition of youth's networks and the nature of the relationships within them can be complex and inconsistent in terms of promoting positive trajectories and exacerbating risk factors (e.g., Alschech et al., 2020; de la Haye et al., 2012). While some studies have found that both emotional and practical help tend to come from family members (e.g., de la Haye, 2012), there are studies showing that family is not a common source for emotional help (e.g., Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Other studies focus on case managers and individuals outside youth's social network (such as mentors with relatable experiences) as important sources of support (e.g., Schenk et al., 2018; Barman-Adhikari & Rice, 2014).

Barman-Adhikari & Rice (2014) found that youth with strong ties to home-based peers (friends and acquaintances from the neighbourhood or social circles in which they were raised), their case managers and family tend to be more motivated and likely to seek employment and other services compared to youth who primarily receive emotional and instrumental support from street-based peers, including partners.

Self-esteem – which is tied to social involvement – is another important consideration for youth at-risk, as high self-esteem has been linked to mitigating against loneliness, suicidal ideation, substance use and health perceptions (Slesnick et al., 2021; Dang, 2014; Kidd & Sharhar, 2010). With the exception of family contexts where there has been abuse, family members (again, defined broadly) are the most likely to provide supports that have the greatest impact on self-esteem and resilience (Kidd & Sharhar, 2010). When family members are not able or appropriate supports, case managers have been found to serve as vital sources of care, especially if youth view case managers as being able to relate to them based on background and experience (Schenk et al., 2018). However, as Cook & Kilmer (2010) note, family and natural supports can provide sustained and committed support that case managers and other professionals often are unable to, once they are no longer involved in service provision. Gaps in supports may occur as a result of turnover or a discontinuation of care. As such, family, natural and home-based peer supports are considered to be vital sources of support in addition to service providers.

Research demonstrates that encouraging and supporting youth to develop and maximize healthy relationships with family members, home-based peers and case managers can improve access to resources, self-esteem, decisions and behaviours – all critical areas in preventing homelessness. Furthermore, addressing attitudes and social norms within social networks can lead to shifts in individuals' beliefs and decisions, which makes the case for including network members in information sharing and supports (Begun et al., 2020).

Following are broad recommendations from the research to strengthen these key relationships in supporting youth at-risk:

Include social networks: Prevention and intervention efforts and activities should not only engage youth, but also their social networks (when safe and appropriate) to promote positive, healthy behaviours and

interactions (Barman-Adhikari et al., 2020). This includes access to health information and resources. As a first step, service providers can assess the common supports youth engage with careful consideration to those promoting positive vs. risk-taking attitudes and behaviours. As Barman-Adhikari and colleagues (2018) suggest, this could be aided by asking youth to create ecomaps (a visual illustration to map social relationships of supportive people in their lives) and co-develop a plan for how to retain contact with these individuals (such as through technology). An important consideration, for example, could be that while there are numerous benefits to family and natural supports, sometimes relationships are strained and/or unsafe for a variety of reasons. The objective and focus may or may not be for the youth to live with their families but to develop or maintain a positive relationship, with boundaries, if this is desired. Family members may also need supports. These considerations and arrangements could help to increase the capacity of family members to offer and sustain supports (de la Haye, 2012).

Reframe: To promote self-esteem, approaches might include working with youth and their supports to re-frame past and current challenges as situational and outside of youth's control rather than as personal failures. Normalize help-seeking behaviour; frame and communicate it consistently as a valuable, necessary part of development rather than a lack of independence or self-reliance (Kidd & Shahar, 2010).

Communication & accessibility: Particularly in the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to consider the role of technology in maintaining contact with youth at risk of homelessness. Studies have shown that homeless youth often use cell phones, texting and social media to maintain social connections (Chan, 2018; Bender et al., 2014; Eyrich-Garg, 2011; Rice et al., 2014). Staying connected through technology is key to protecting youth from depression and risk behaviours such as substance use (Rice et al., 2012). However, a barrier is access to consistent cell phone service and access to technology. An additional consideration is the lack of privacy that many young people experience during periods of lockdown, if, for example, they live in overcrowded housing. This may impede the use of technology in connecting with social supports and service providers. If access is possible, face-to-face video conferencing such as Google Hangout or Skype may help to build relationships of trust when face-to-face is not an option. It is also important to build trust and reciprocity through long-term case management, high accessibility and consistent, frequent follow-up (Hedge, Sianko, & McDonell, 2017; Schenk et al., 2018).

Expand social capital through mentorship: Mentors can be an impactful source of support for youth at-risk of homelessness. Individuals from outside of the youth's network can bring new perspectives and contribute to positive attitudes and behaviours. Studies have found that youth are much more likely to engage with supports such as counselling when they feel understood. An important aspect of this is youth viewing the service provider as being able to relate to them through similar socio-demographic identity and experiences (Schenck et al., 2018). Whenever possible, mentors, case managers and counsellors would ideally share socio-demographic and/or relatable experiences with the youth mentee.

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH BRIEF SERIES

This research brief series was created as part of the efforts of MtS DEMS to build stronger links between research and practice, towards improving program processes and outcomes in preventing youth homelessness. Topics are established based on the identified needs and interests of our Communities of Practice through documentary analysis of meeting minutes, refined based on the literature and confirmed in consultation with members. The research is conducted through a systematic process that is based on a modified scoping review framework (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Literature across fields such as prevention, social services, health, and homelessness are included and themes are extracted based on the objectives of the brief.

For more information on the process to develop the research briefs, please contact the author at: ***sohnj@yorku.ca***

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