



Research Paper Summary

In 2021-22, the Supports for Student Learning Program (SSLP) within ESDC contracted seven research projects to better understand barriers and facilitators to educational attainment in Canada. Each project was led by an external researcher(s) and involved a literature review, a scan of provincial/territorial programs and services, and a discussion paper. The objective of this research series was three-fold:

- 1. Build the knowledge and evidence base and refine the SSLP's understanding of the various groups of clients served (i.e., the barriers they face);*
- 2. Improve the SSLP's capacity to engage in targeted outreach with groups and organizations that serve specific groups or underserved populations (e.g., Black and racialized students, Indigenous students, 2SLGBTQI+ students, youth in care, youth experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and youth facing a digital divide);*
- 3. Inform future directions for the SSLP (e.g., to identify priority streams supporting specific population groups or projects reaching certain underserved students or partners who have expertise in addressing specific barriers).*

Below is an overview of the research project examining barriers and facilitators experienced by students experiencing or having had experienced homelessness. This project was completed in May 2022.

Supports for Student Learning Program Research Series: Barriers faced by students experiencing or having had experienced homelessness

CONTEXT

According to the latest version of the State of Homelessness Report, published in 2016, at least 235,000 people experience homelessness in Canada each year, with 35,000 individuals experiencing homelessness on any given night¹. Of these figures, it is estimated that youth make up 18.7% of this population.

Youth and students who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness face particular and unique challenges to persisting in their education, including completing high school and accessing and transitioning to post-secondary

¹ Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (2016). The State of Homelessness in Canada 2016. <https://homelesshub.ca/SOHC2016>



education (PSE). Students who are homeless, or have previously experienced homelessness, face discriminatory attitudes and behaviours due to their living situation. According to results from the National Youth Homelessness Survey, homeless youth are four times more likely to be victims of bullying in school than their non-homeless peers². Homeless youth may live with mental illnesses and/or learning disabilities that make it difficult to persist in their education and could lead to academic disengagement³. Homeless students may also have less access to educational support resources than their peers, including family supports and access to tutoring and extracurricular activities, as well as limited access to financial resources and supports.

Research Questions

Recognizing the multiplicity of challenges that homeless and at-risk youth face, the SSLP commissioned research to better understand their education needs and experiences. Specifically, the SSLP sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the barriers to education faced by students experiencing or having experienced homelessness?
2. What factors may prevent students experiencing or having experienced homelessness from fully engaging in their studies and how might these barriers affect completion of high school as well as transitions to and persistence in post-secondary education?
3. Beyond barriers that may be experienced in the formal education system, what external factors may affect students experiencing or having experienced homelessness' attachment to their learning and social networks, thereby contributing to their overall sense of belonging and academic motivation?
4. What recent trends are emerging as challenges facing this underserved population? Particularly following and during the COVID-19 pandemic, what barriers have recently changed, been highlighted, or worsened or improved?
5. How do varying identity factors (e.g., age, race, sexual orientation and gender identity, (dis)ability status, rural/remote vs urban location, poverty, etc.) impact the educational outcomes of students experiencing or having experienced homelessness?

² Stephen Gaetz, Bill O'Grady, Sean Kidd & Kaitlin Schwan. (2016). Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press. ISBN: 978-1-77221-059-0

³ Ibid

6. What services are provided and/or investments have been made by provincial and territorial governments to reduce these barriers? What gaps or overlaps exist?
7. What recommended actions could Employment and Social Development Canada's SSLP take to reduce these barriers, enhance learning experiences, and overall improve educational outcomes for students experiencing or having experienced homelessness?

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER(S)

This project was led by **Dr. Stephen Gaetz, COH President**. Dr. Gaetz is a Professor in the Faculty of Education, the Director of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and the Homeless Hub, the Scientific Director of Making the Shift Youth Social Innovation Lab, and the Co-Director of the UNECE Charter Centre of Excellence on Youth Homelessness. As a scholar, Dr. Stephen Gaetz has had a long-standing interest in understanding homelessness – its causes, how it is experienced, and potential solutions. His program of research has been defined by his desire to 'make research matter' through conducting rigorous scholarly research that contributes to our knowledge base on homelessness and is mobilized so that it has an impact on policy, practice, and public opinion. Dr. Gaetz has published extensively on the subject of homelessness and his research on youth homelessness, prevention, and models of intervention have contributed to the significant change in how we respond to homelessness in Canada. In 2015, he was appointed to the Province of Ontario's Expert Advisory Panel on Homelessness, and in 2017 he played a leading role as a member of the Government of Canada's Advisory Panel on Homelessness. As an internationally recognized leader and innovator in the area of knowledge mobilization, Dr. Gaetz has pioneered efforts to bring together researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and people with lived experience of homelessness to participate in a broad agenda of community-engaged scholarship and knowledge creation designed to contribute to solutions to homelessness.

Babatunde Alabi, MPH and MDP, Research and Evaluation Officer

Babatunde holds two master's degrees, in the areas of Public Health and Development Practice. His research experience cuts across many disciplines, including homelessness, resource development, and environmental impact, food security, and criminal justice. Babatunde is a development practitioner with a decade of experience implementing donor-funded programs. He has worked in the international development sector in various capacities, supporting the design and implementation of monitoring and evaluation frameworks on subjects related to governance and health systems. More recently, he worked with Indigenous-led organizations and communities in Canada supporting research programs and community planning initiatives. Babatunde is passionate about using program and

policy research and evaluation as a tool to promote changes in socioeconomic systems to pave the way for sustainable development.

KEY FINDINGS

The causes and consequences of youth homelessness are many and intersecting

- The issue of youth homelessness is an intersecting policy issue occurring because of systems failures and structural factors, which in some cases may be exasperated by individual and relational factors. When considering the causes and impacts of the experience of homelessness on youth, and particularly students, analysts should consider how the intersecting structures of poverty and socio-economic status, racism, homophobia and transphobia, colonization, lack of affordable housing, and lack of accessible supports impact not only youths' ability to exit homelessness, but their risk of falling back into homelessness as well.

Youth experience homelessness differently than adults

- The experiences and needs of youth who have or are currently experiencing homelessness are unique in comparison to homeless adults, and require specialized supports that consider these differences. According to the Government of Canada's 2018 Point in Time Count, 50% of all currently homeless people had their first experience of homelessness before the age of 25. Each year, between 35,000 and 45,000 youth experience homelessness in Canada, making up approximately 20% of the homeless population in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2014). Youth experiencing homelessness are twice as likely as adults to be among the "hidden homeless" (e.g., sleeping on the couches of peers or staying with other family members without guarantee that this living arrangement will be permanent).

Youth with foster care experience, 2SLGBTQI+ and racialized individuals are overrepresented among Canada's homeless youth population

- The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness conducted an in-depth review of the available literature on the subject of youth homelessness to paint an accurate portrait of the demographics of youth experiencing homelessness.
 - The National Youth Homelessness Survey found that amongst the participants (youth with lived experiences relating to homelessness), 29.5% identified as 2SLGBTQI+, 30% identified as Indigenous, and 28.2% as members of racialized communities.
 - While less than 0.3% of youth in Canada have had some involvement with child protection services, the figure for youth experiencing homelessness is 58%, and 47% had a history of being apprehended and placed in foster care or group homes (Gaetz et al., 2016). In addition, Indigenous youth (70.5%) were more likely than youth who were

- members of racialized communities (43.5%) and white youth (55.1%) to report involvement with child protection services (Gaetz et al., 2016).
- Youth experiencing homelessness oftentimes come from homes with high levels of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; interpersonal violence and assault; parental neglect; exposure to intimate partner violence, parental psychiatric disorders and addictions.⁴

Youth who experience homelessness face significant education opportunity gaps

- Regarding the educational experiences of homeless youth, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness noted the following findings:
 - The dropout rate of youth experiencing homelessness is a staggering **53.2%** compared to the Canadian national average drop out rate of 9.4%. 50.5% of youth experiencing homelessness are not employed, or in education or training (NEET).
 - 63.4% of youth who responded to the Without A Home survey⁵ stated that they struggled with school attendance and only **10.3%** continued their formal education by attending some form of post-secondary education.
 - Female youth with experiences of homelessness were the most likely to currently be attending school (54.1%) compared to male youth (33.6%) and youth of other genders (12.3%).
 - Youth who identified as white were significantly more likely to finish high school and go on to obtain some PSE experience compared to youth of other racial identities. 70% of Indigenous youth between the ages of 20 to 23 had completed their high school education (whereas the national average is 90%). This demonstrates the ongoing systemic impacts of colonialism and racism on the educational outcomes of BIPOC youth, especially those experiencing homelessness.
 - The above statistics should not lead to a presumption that youth experiencing homelessness do not have educational aspirations beyond high school. 49.8% of surveyed youth stated that they enjoyed school. According to another study conducted in the US, more than 90% of the

⁴ Ballon et al., 2001; Gaetz et al., 2002; Karabanow, 2004, 2009; Rew, et al., 2001; Thrane et al., 2006; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Tyler et al., 2001; Van den Bree et al., 2009; Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999; Andres-Lemay et al., 2005; McMorris et al., 2002.

⁵ The Without A Home survey, developed by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada, was a national survey designed to capture the experiences of youth experiencing homelessness. A total of 1,261 young people completed the survey across Canada, with more than half of responses coming from Ontario. These respondents were youth age 13-24 receiving services from community agencies and organizations across Canada. These youth-serving agencies registered to participate in the survey and assisted with the recruitment process. The survey asked questions about specific experiences of homelessness, as well as education, in addition to various demographic questions such as ethnicity, gender identity, and Indigenous status. The Without A Home survey is a cross-sectional survey that has been run twice, with the most recent iteration occurring in 2019.

youth experiencing homelessness interviewed aspired for careers that needed education beyond high school. Many youth experiencing homelessness stated they felt **pushed out** of school due to a number of factors, including a lack of understanding or lowered expectations from teachers and experiences of bullying by other students.

- Homelessness has a significant impact on the life trajectories of youth, including their levels of attachment to education, success as a student and what experiences or opportunities are available/accessible to them. Oftentimes, support for youth experiencing homelessness is lacking, which creates barriers to having a positive school experience. This can translate to a cycle of instability, which in the longer term impacts job stability and other social determinants of health.

Prevention-based wraparound supports are most effective, but are lacking

- Most supports offered to youth are reactive in nature (i.e., only being accessible once the youth have become homeless). Research shows that the most effective supports are preventative in nature and seek to provide youth with wrap-around supports before they become homeless. The most effective supports provide youth with foundational life skills, self-esteem development and mental health support, fostering attachments to education and fostering supportive community environments (whether strengthening relationships with parents/caregivers, community leaders, Elders and faith leaders, etc.).
- Additionally, most supports offered to youth experiencing homelessness are only available after the age of 16, but findings show that 40% of youth experiencing homelessness first experienced homelessness before the age of 16. Educational disengagement begins for youth experiencing homelessness much earlier, often around or before the age of 12.

Better system-wide collaboration is needed to support homeless youth

- There are significant policy gaps when it comes to addressing the educational barriers, which arise for youth experiencing homelessness. There needs to be greater levels of system-wide collaboration across levels of government (federal, provincial, territorial and municipal) and across government departments, along with community agencies to address this issue. Policies, like programming, should focus on holistically preventing youth homelessness, rather than be reactive in nature (such as policies leading to suspensions/expulsions based on school attendance).

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Make addressing youth homelessness a specific priority

- A targeted strategy to address youth homelessness will not only produce better outcomes for young people and their families, but also potentially have a longer-term impact on chronicity, helping the Government of Canada achieve its goal of ending chronic homelessness. This includes having a policy framework and funding stream to support communities to implement effective strategies.
- Currently SSLP “aims to reach students who may face greater barriers to education” which includes (but is not limited to):
 1. Indigenous students;
 2. Visible minority and racialized students;
 3. Students living with disabilities;
 4. Students living in a low-income household;
 5. Students identifying as 2SLGBTQI+.
- Youth experiencing homelessness should be prioritized as well, with an intersectional lens, identifying that this also includes students in the other five categories.

Focus on prevention and early intervention (e.g., prevent school disengagement)

- There is a need for resources and investments that are targeted to help prevent youth from experiencing homelessness and leaving school early. Existing funding and resources need to be reoriented to focus on the prevention of youth homelessness. Reorienting resources is an area the SSLP should consider in future iterations of funding and program delivery.

Tailor programs and policies for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness

- SSLP and education systems across Canada are aligned in their visions to enhance educational outcomes by striving to address barriers to education for students facing the impacts of systemic discrimination. However, a potential drawback of not including policies and programs that target youth homelessness may lead to youth being underserved and not gaining access to the supports they need to complete their education successfully. The SSLP may consider its role in bridging this gap by offering to fund or deliver programs that target youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, or tailoring programs to meet the unique needs of this population.

Partner with community agencies to implement effective responses to youth homelessness prevention and address educational barriers

- Solutions to youth homelessness must involve collaboration with youth-serving agencies - those who are already doing the work of preventing and/or responding to youth homelessness. The SSLP should consider looking within its existing partnerships or stakeholder groups to assess

whether they are already working with agencies that support youth at risk, or who are experiencing homelessness. Following an assessment of existing partnerships, the SSLP should look to build new relationships with agencies that are delivering services and supports to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Fund programs that target students who have dropped out of school to return to school

- Currently, much of the SSLP's program is designed to support youth currently enrolled in education through wraparound supports. There has not been as much attention paid to youth who have disengaged from formal learning systems but would like to return. Youth who want to go back to school encounter a myriad of challenges including stressors like mental health issues, substance use disorders, low self-esteem, and challenges with establishing relationships in school. Funding programs that create a flexible, supportive, non-judgmental environment for will help SSLP to contribute to increased school engagement of at-risk, homeless and formerly homeless youth.

Fund programs that focus on educational and career aspirations of youth at risk or experiencing homelessness

- Financial barriers and lack of mentorship were identified as key challenges that youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness face as they prepare for PSE. School-based counseling and mentorship programs are not robust enough to address the unique contexts of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This challenge presents an opportunity for the SSLP to increase access to mentors for young people at-risk or who are experiencing homelessness via its after-school funding programs.
- Another challenge is the difficulty that students experience in accessing financial aid. This challenge presents an opportunity for the Canada Student Financial Assistance Program operating within ESDC's Learning Branch to create a funding stream that is specific to and tailored to the needs of students who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Fund culturally supportive and culturally affirming supports/interventions for Indigenous youth at risk or experiencing homelessness

- Indigenous youth experiencing homelessness face unique challenges. There are opportunities for the SSLP to support programs that are culturally based, utilize holistic frameworks, focus on relationships, and acknowledge cultural context to mental health interventions.
- A lack of representation and value placed on Indigenous ways of knowing in formal Canadian education systems is a significant system barrier to the educational attainment of Indigenous students.

- The "educational system do[es] not represent the lived realities, histories, and strengths of Aboriginal and Black youth, thereby setting them up to fail in an environment where they are made to learn about a Eurocentric perspective of the world" (Baskin, 2013, p. 3).

Leverage initiatives demonstrating good outcomes for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness across education systems

- There is a need for system-level supports that target youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness rather than one-off, localized and limited in scope program models which are common in Canada. There is an opportunity to better equip youth-serving organizations with tailored supports and greater resources/capacity to respond to youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The SSLP should consider supporting the scale up and expansion of initiatives that support homeless youth, to ensure that opportunities to succeed in school are readily, and equitably available to them.

Recommendations for Other-Government-Departments: Make the Prevention of Homelessness a Policy and Funding Priority

- As of April 1, 2022, Canada's Homelessness Strategy "[Reaching Home](#)" and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) reside within Infrastructure Canada, under the responsibility of the Minister of Housing and Diversity and Inclusion.
- While Reaching Home has made two of the four mandatory outcomes areas for community entities (reduction of inflow into homelessness and reduction of returns to homelessness), there is little policy or funding support for prevention, and little mention of it in the program directives. Because the shift to prevention is a change management challenge for communities that may have limited capacity to address this, the Government of Canada should more explicitly have a policy and funding framework that includes clear directives and provides support for training and technical Assistance.
- An effective response to homelessness necessarily should rely on a whole of government approach involving relevant Ministries and Departments, with mandate letters explicitly requesting how ministries will contribute to a reduction in homelessness.

CONTACT

EDSC.DGA.PSAE-SSLP.LB.ESDC@hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca