

# THE LONELINESS PROJECT

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Responding to  
young women &  
gender-diverse  
youth transitioning  
to housing

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## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to acknowledge and recognize that Canada is a settler colonial state on Turtle Island, which for generations has been governed and inhabited by Indigenous Peoples practicing traditional ways of doing, knowing, and being. This report acknowledges that the current homelessness crisis, disproportionately impacting Indigenous Peoples, is a direct result of colonial and patriarchal policies that have dispossessed Indigenous Peoples of their lands and homes, and commodified land and housing as profitable assets leading to the concentration of wealth with a privileged few.

This research took place across Ontario, home to many traditional Indigenous territories. The land known as Ontario covers 46 treaties and other agreements. A significant portion of this research took place in Ottawa and Toronto. The name Ottawa derives from the Algonquin word 'adawe', which means "to trade". Ottawa is located on the unceded, unsurrendered Territory of the Anishinaabe Algonquin Nation whose presence on that land reaches back to time immemorial. The name Toronto derives from the Mohawk word 'Tkaronto', which means "the place in the water where the trees are standing". Toronto is located on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Toronto is covered by Treaty 13, signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, we would like to thank all of the lived experts who participated in this project and shared their insights, expertise, and analysis. Their priorities and wisdom have guided this work, and this work is dedicated to young women and gender-diverse people across the country who do not have access to adequate housing.

The findings presented in this report are the culmination of mutual collaboration between academics, lived experts, community builders, and service providers. It is rooted in a horizontal work model that values all knowledge that team members bring to the table. We are grateful to everyone who worked on this project and who gave their time and energy, especially during the height in the pandemic when those qualities were in short supply.

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# INTRODUCTION

In this report, we share findings from The Loneliness Project – a research study made up of academic researchers, lived expert researchers, students, and young women and gender-diverse people who have been homeless. We want to tell you about what it’s like for young women and gender-diverse people who are exiting homelessness into housing. Youth shared with us how stress, loneliness, isolation, a lack of connection, and feelings of unsafety make these transitions difficult. We want to highlight these issues so that as a sector, we can recognize that a roof over someone’s head is important but is rarely enough to keep people stably housed and improve their wellbeing. We also want to draw attention to how gender identity impacts the transition to housing. The young people we spoke with along with lived expert members of the research team have ideas on how to make things better, and we hope people listen to their voices.

Despite decades of research and advocacy across Canada, youth homelessness remains a persistent and increasingly prevalent problem. These trends are concerning given the enormous harm experienced by youth who are homeless and/or precariously housed, including health and mental health challenges, criminal victimization, sexual exploitation, isolation, and nutritional vulnerability (Gaetz et al., 2016; Schwan et al., 2018). Despite the severity of these challenges, societal responses have been primarily emergency-focused (e.g., shelters, drop-ins), largely failing to act on prevention and quick transitions out of homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2018). **But this is starting to change.** More and more research and practices are seeking to understand what factors promote housing retention and wellness following youth’s exits from homelessness.

The causes and conditions of homelessness are unique for young people who are typically economically and socially dependent on adults, and who are often undergoing significant physical, cognitive, and emotional developmental growth (Nichols et al., 2017). As such, the solutions to becoming stably housed need to be responsive to young people’s priorities, emotional and cognitive development, and to

the trauma they have experienced before and while they were unhoused. This process of accessing and maintaining housing often requires shifts in young people’s sense of identity and relationships to others, as well as changes to their worldviews (Karabanow, 2008). Available research indicates that following exits from homelessness, many youth’s housing stability and wellness continues to be undermined by mental health challenges, compounded trauma, a lack of social support, and extreme poverty (Brueckner et al., 2011; Kidd et al., 2016; Thulien et al., 2018). In one of the first studies of its kind in Canada, Karabanow et al. (2010) document how strained family relationships, abuse, trauma, and poverty are factors linked to young people becoming homeless. This research was extended in Karabanow et al.’s (2018) Homeless Youth and the Search for Stability study, which revealed the continual presence of structural barriers and limited social networks, resulting in social isolation, difficulties maintaining housing, and feelings of hopelessness and loneliness in youth. Thulien (2017) revealed that young people exiting homelessness often lack opportunities to extend their social networks or formulate long-range plans, frequently experiencing ongoing social and economic marginalization, feelings of “outsiderness” and fears of becoming homeless

again. In fact, social exclusion, loneliness, and limited social networks can become worse once young people are housed and become responsible for juggling competing priorities, often continuing to live in poverty, all while seeing a reduction in access to services (Kidd et al., 2018; Roy et al., 2011; Thulien et al., 2018).

Among research that demonstrates positive outcomes for housing stability, Roy and colleagues (2011) found that high school completion, employment, and mental health supports significantly improve young people's success with their housing. Other research aligns with these findings, identifying that social and mental health supports provided alongside housing is more effective than housing alone for young people exiting homelessness (Lako et al., 2013; Krotofil et al., 2018).

**Research on the realities of transitioning to housing is important, but regrettably, little of the emerging scholarship considers the ways gender structures these experiences.** Specifically, there is limited focus on how young women and gender-diverse people may face unique conditions of social exclusion and loneliness when they exit homelessness. This gap is particularly concerning given that women-identified people are one of the fastest growing subgroups of homeless persons today (Kidd et al., 2017). A gender-based analysis of transitions out of homelessness is critical to addressing homelessness more broadly, and must consider how gender mediates experiences of inclusion, social connectedness, wellbeing, and housing stability.

Research that unpacks gendered experiences of homelessness and transitions to housing are more important than ever. The data is clear that women and gender-diverse young people face intersecting oppressions and discrimination. For example, young women and gender-diverse youth are 1.5 times more likely to have experienced childhood abuse than their male counterparts (Gaetz et al., 2016). One study showed that 49% of gender-diverse youth experienced homelessness before the age of 16, which has a

significant impact as there are fewer resources and supports available because parental/guardian consent is usually required (Gaetz et al., 2016). Similarly, another survey revealed that among women and gender-diverse people who were homeless before 16, the average age of their first experience of homelessness was a staggering 11 years old and Indigenous and gender-diverse people were among the most likely to have their first experience of homelessness at such a young age (Schwan et al., 2021). It is no wonder then that cisgender young women are 12% more likely to report distress while homeless than young men and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth are almost twice as likely to have a suicide attempt than cis gender and straight youth (Kidd et al., 2021).

While not specific to youth, recent research reveals that gender-diverse people who have been homeless face enormous barriers to service, experiencing discrimination and harassment in their efforts to access housing, employment, and resources. For example, 41% of gender-diverse people report discrimination at homeless-serving agencies, and 43% report discrimination from landlords. This means that gender-diverse people are 1.5 times more likely to sleep in public spaces than cisgender women (Nelson et al., 2023). Several studies also confirm a correlation between youth homelessness, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking for young women (Clawson et al., 2009; Schwan et al., 2017).

The research paints a very clear picture – young women and gender-diverse youth face significant hardship, trauma, and systems barriers that have an effect on their transition to housing. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequities and marginalization for people who are homeless (Richard et al., 2021). During the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 many services shifted to virtual support, had limited availability, and some closed altogether (Buchnea & McKitterick, 2020; Roebuck et al., 2022). Young people who were unhoused found many of the remaining services inaccessible, uncomfortable, and isolating. Boredom, isolation, stress, and loneliness were common for many

(but not all) young people, which in part led to decreased wellbeing and worsening mental health and substance use (Buchnea & McKitterick, 2020; Noble et al., 2022). The experience of the pandemic was gendered, with young women and gender-diverse people facing intersectional difficulties. During the pandemic, young women and gender-diverse people found it harder to access basic needs such as food, shelter, housing, social services, and health care supports than young men (Noble et al., 2022). Women, including young women, were also more likely to lose their jobs at the beginning of the pandemic and were the slowest to regain employment when lockdowns ended (Schwan et al., 2020). Intimate partner violence increased while the ability to intervene and provide safe services for victims decreased (Buchnea & McKitterick, 2020; Lakam, 2020).

**The information provided above offers the context for what young people told us in this research project and what some of the project team members have also experienced – that discrimination, isolation, a lack of safety, and exclusion remain part of their lives even after becoming housed.** They unmistakably describe the gendered nature of their experiences – that their social location as a woman and/or gender-diverse person permeates how they navigate their conditions of housing, support, and simply existing in their home and neighbourhood. Youth also provided clear directives for how to improve their transition to housing and create a sense of wellbeing. The stories they shared with us and the solutions they offer cut across six themes:

- Loneliness
- Safety
- The unique experiences of newcomers
- Housing
- Parenting
- COVID-19

During this study we also heard from support people who offer mutual aid and/or service provision to young people. Mutual aid refers to voluntary, reciprocal relationships of caring for one another and offering benefit for all parties. These support people provided their insights on how to best provide care to young women and gender-diverse people, especially during the tumultuous time of the pandemic. These participants echoed many of the systemic issues raised by young people themselves and our research team, emphasizing the urgent need for solutions.

Each theme described below includes an infographic that contains a description of the finding, solutions as they pertain to accessibility, relational, and systemic levels, and a scenario that encompasses the stories the young people shared with us about their experiences. This scenario grounds the scholarly research in the real lives of the people we worked with. The evidence we have collected and solutions we offer are not abstract – they are responsive to people's very real situations and seek to chart a better path forward.

**The findings and recommendations offered below come directly from young women and gender-diverse people themselves. They know what we need to do. Now is the time to listen and act.**



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# METHODOLOGY

## PROJECT TEAM

### *Designing the project*

This project is a collaboration between academic researchers, lived expert researchers, students, and young women and gender-diverse people who have transitioned from homelessness to housing. The academic research team received funding to do this work a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic required us to pivot every plan and process we had imagined for this research to reflect the moment in time and the requirement to work virtually (due to lockdown and then later, due to Research Ethics Board requirements). While this disruption was certainly stressful, ultimately it strengthened the project in two key ways. First, we were able to expand the scope of the research to all of Ontario rather than two nearby cities we originally planned. Second, and most importantly, while the project was originally conceived as a community-based project and planned to work with partnered service providers and the people they served, the change allowed us to create a project that aimed to embody participatory-action research (PAR) principles. PAR research seeks to embody the principle of ‘nothing about us, without us’ (Lived Experience Advisory Council, 2016; Nelson, 2020). At its core, participatory research is about:

community dialogue, education, consciousness-raising, and mobilization for action. As a democratic process, it aims to develop practical solutions to pressing community issues. As research for, with and by the people (Fals-Borda, 1991), a participatory approach engages members of the community as co-researchers rather than as research subjects, ideally, involving participants in all stages of the process – in setting the research agenda, posing questions for inquiry, participating in the collection and analysis of data, and in deciding the outcomes of the process or how the research will be used. Participatory research accentuates the inherent human capacity to create knowledge

based on experience – to analyze and reaffirm or criticize popular knowledge, flesh out local problems, examine their contexts, seek and enact solutions (Conrad & Kendal, 2009: 255).

Research that works to embody the PAR philosophy and methodology is inherently political. It requires action in terms of social and structural change, while also prioritizing emotional support and flexibility for all research team members (Paradis & Mosher, 2012). PAR seeks to transform the researcher/researched relationship (Smith et al., 2010). While our efforts were often partial and imperfect, the research team sought to identify, name, and challenge power imbalances between research team members. This reflection and reorientation was a continual work in progress and undoubtedly could have been strengthened at every step in the project. We acknowledge the commitment of research team members to holding us accountable for our aspired efforts towards ‘cultural humility’ (Yarbrough, 2020) and solidarity research.

An example of our collective efforts to conduct this research through a PAR lens was the lived expert research team’s leadership in creating a tenant rights workshop for study participants. Led by Holly, the team heard about the tenancy issues some of the young people faced, and although lived expert team had some personal expertise in this area given their own advocacy efforts and lived/living experiences, Holly saw an opportunity to collaborate with a familiar organization to assist the young people in leaning their rights. We teamed up with the [Canadian Centre for Housing Rights](#) who provided the workshop, which included tangible tools for people to assert their rights.

## Project team development

The project was a collaboration between all project team members with the academic team leading phases 1 and 2 of the project and the lived-expert researchers leading phase 3. The Advisory Team, made up of Cheyanne Ratnam and Mardi Daley, provided invaluable guidance and support to the team on how to appropriately and effectively engage in meaningful PAR research and to make sure that the work was positive for the lived expert research team members and the participants. Research assistants provided support at varying points throughout the project and the project would not have been possible without Maryam, Wajiha, and Trinity's skills and enthusiasm.

Thanks to the leadership of the lived expert research team members, the research team underwent three trainings, some of which were dedicated spaces for lived expert researchers and some included the whole team. The team received the following trainings:

- Cheyanne Thomas – Decolonizing Research Workshop
- Alice Conroy – Supporting Gender-Diverse Homeless Youth Workshop
- Cheyanne Ratnam – Self-care and Wellness Workshop
- Charlotte Smith – Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) training. All members of the research team received certification.
- Erin Dej – Qualitative Data Analysis Training

One of the strengths of this research project is that researchers with lived experience of homelessness provided multiple kinds of expertise – that of their lived expertise and also various professional skills that they shared with the team. All team members offered their time, knowledge, and talents so that mutual learning took place in as much of a horizontal process as possible. It also meant the lived expert perspectives and knowledge was infused into all aspects of the project, including in training and mentorship.

## Research phases

All phases of the research received ethical clearance through Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board. The research project underwent four distinct phases:

### PHASE 1 – INTERVIEWS

We conducted interviews with young women and gender-diverse people about their experiences of loneliness and isolation as they transition from homelessness to housing. COVID-19 protocols required that we recruit participants with the help of staff at multiple youth shelters, through snowball sampling, and with the help of the lived expert research team and Advisory Team, who handed out flyers to potential participants. The interviews took place from May to September 2020, during the first summer of the pandemic when we were experiencing the initial lockdowns and restrictions. Because of the restrictions all the interviews were conducted virtually through Microsoft Teams or by phone, based on participant preference. We were able to connect with youth through our partner agencies and lived expert research team members who shared information about the project and in some cases provided access to technology to facilitate the interviews. Participants were paid for their time and insight through e-transfers.

In total, we spoke to 22 young people. Figure 1 provides a demographic breakdown of the young people we spoke to.

Demographic	Result	Number
Average age	21.5	22
Average length of time homeless	2 years	10
Gender identity	Woman	86% (19)
	Gender-diverse identity	13% (3)
Sexual orientation	Straight	52% (11)
	2SLGBTQAI+	47% (10)
Race/ethnicity	Black, Indigenous, racialized, and/or person of colour	59% (13) (Black – 8; Latinx – 2; South Asian – 2; Indigenous – 1)
	white	41% (9)

Figure 1

The interview guide was developed by the research team and consisted of a series of 25 questions asking about their history of housing, what their experience was with housing during the pandemic, their feelings of loneliness, isolation, and/or belonging, how these experiences are mediated through their gender identity, and their vision for society to better respond to the unique housing context facing young women and gender-diverse people.

## PHASE 2 – JOURNALING

Participants from Phase 1 were invited to participate in the second phase, which consisted of keeping a journal for seven days about their feelings of loneliness or belonging during that time. Youth were invited to keep a journal in a way that worked best for them; this included mailing some participants a physical journal, using a notes app, texting the researcher, and/or using a word processor. Participants were

prompted to take stock each day of how they were feeling and to note any instances of feeling connected or lonely or isolated. The young people then shared their journals with the research team and we held a second interview to go over their journals. Twenty of the 22 original participants participated in Phase 2. The follow-up interviews were extremely rich, providing significant detail on their lives and their experiences of loneliness and belonging, as well as experiences of connection and disconnection. The majority of the young people who participated in this project enjoyed the journaling process and found it facilitated insights and healing they found inherently valuable, and many wanted to keep it up, suggesting that the research method itself

had a positive impact. The interviews took place approximately two weeks after the initial interview and were conducted by the same member of the research team to ensure consistency and relationship building with the participants. Participants were paid for their time keeping the journal and conducting the second interview.

## PHASE 3 – SUPPORT PERSON INTERVIEWS

As Phase 2 of the research was wrapping up, we received funding from [Making the Shift](#) to conduct research on the issue of young women’s transition to housing and loneliness in relation to COVID specifically. This additional funding allowed us to interview support people about the care they provided to young women and gender-diverse people during the pandemic. By support people, we are referring to people who are employed to provide resources and support

(i.e., service providers) as well as people who informally provided mutual aid to young people during the pandemic, especially during initial lockdowns as many organizations shut down or significantly reduced their services. There was tremendous value in including all kinds of support people because findings from the interviews showed that many people relied heavily on informal, on-the-ground support rather than, or in addition to, formal service provision. This research was carried out between November 2020 and February 2021. A total of 12 support people participated and figure 2 provides information on who we spoke with.

Demographic	Result	Number
<b>Support person</b>	Formal	9
	Informal	4*
<b>Average length of time providing support</b>	2 years	12.5 years
<b>Gender identity</b>	Non-binary	2
	Woman	10
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	Black, Indigenous, racialized, person of colour	5
	white	7

\* Results equal more than twelve because two participants provided both formal and informal support.

Figure 2

In the interviews we asked questions about what kinds of support they were providing young women and gender-diverse people during the pandemic, the challenges in providing support given lockdown restrictions, service disruptions and closures, and how they assessed the young people they were connected with were faring.

## PHASE 4 – WORKSHOPS

The final and culminating phase of the research was conceived, developed, and executed by

the lived expert research team. Beginning in January 2021, Charlotte, Holly, and Chinue took the lead to create a series of workshops with young women and gender-diverse people that took place over the course of eight weeks in summer 2021. They were provided support by the Advisory Team and the research team. There were two goals of the workshops – acting as a form of ‘member-checking’ (Birt et al., 2016) to ensure that the analyses and findings that the research team was constructing from the first three phases was accurate and in keeping with the lived experience of participants. Second, and crucial to PAR research, the workshops were

designed as solutions-generating spaces, where young women and gender-diverse people could brainstorm structural, systems, policy, and programmatic changes that could respond to gendered experiences of transitioning to housing. A sense of community and meaningful connection between the lived expert researchers and the participants arose during these workshops. Several participants expressed enjoying their participation as it gave them a chance to connect with peers, feel heard, exchange ideas, and feel connected during the pandemic.

To begin this process, the lived expert research team reviewed interview transcripts from the three previous phases of the research.

With the help of the research assistants, the research team identified seven key themes that emerged from the interviews and journals. These themes acted as the basis for the eight workshops to follow – one workshop on each theme with a final workshop focused on cross-sectional solutions development.

### Composites

The lived expert research team developed an innovative method for sharing the findings with

participants. Because many of the workshop participants were recruited from the previous research phases, the team wanted to ensure that the findings could be accurately shared with the group without singling anyone out and while maintaining confidentiality. As such, the team created composites to present the findings. Composites consist of using the narratives provided by many people to create a single story that generally represents the essence of people's lives (Willis, 2019). As such the composite fills several roles:

The composite first person narrative is more than a definition or series of statements about a phenomenon; tells something that connects with universal human qualities so that the reader can relate personally to the themes; is a story that readers can imagine in a personal way; attempts to contribute to new understanding about the phenomenon; and is not exhaustive, but allows the topic to be seen more clearly (Wertz et al., 2011: 3).

The lived expert research team carefully created seven composites for each of the themes (there was no composite for the final workshop devoted to driving solutions). The composites captured the themes running throughout the interviews and journals while also creating a space for participants to insert their own experiences. To fully capture the storytelling component of the composites, the team hired actors to audio record a narration of each that were then played during the workshop. The composites acted as a jumping off point to orient the conversation about each theme.

Here is an example of one of the composites the research team used during the workshop on safety:

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*Hi, my name is Abby. I'm 20 years old now, but from 16-18 I was homeless. I became homeless when I came out as trans and had to deal with a lot of unsafe situations. I slept outside. I slept with people to be safe. I've had to pretend I*

*was a guy. I've had to be a sex worker. I've been turned away from shelters for not dressing or identifying with the identity I was assigned at birth. Anyways, I'm housed now! For 6 months so far, beating my previous record. My place has 4 walls, drafty windows (1 broken for extra fresh air factor), screaming neighbors, an invasive landlord... but I do have a backyard!.. that's dirt and glass. I have an amazing doctor who has been helping me, and a therapist, both who are very flexible with my appointment times since they know how hard it is for me to leave. I actually have a friend who usually comes with me to my appointments because someone on my street attacked me before, but when that's not an option I have my trustee side knife.*

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### Workshop design

The workshops were uniquely designed to meet the needs of the research project, the research team, and the participants simultaneously. Because lived expert members of the research team designed and led the workshops, and were guided by Advisory Team and training modules, there was an enhanced emphasis on reciprocity and creating a space of peer connection and support as much as the workshops were a mode of data collection. This was evident throughout the eight workshops, but in particular in one instance where a participant made a comment that was hurtful to some of the others in the workshop. Because of the relationship that the lived expert research team had built with one another and with the participants, as a group they were able to quickly and organically work through the potential conflict and have a conversation that was safe and supportive for everyone. This example also highlights the value of PAR-informed research where half of the research team have lived expertise and are equipped to navigate these situations with a heightened level of sensitivity and understanding.

Designing the workshops with reciprocity took various forms, including:

- Hiring a designated social worker to provide mental health support during and after each workshop. This included the social worker attending each workshop in a private virtual “room” for participants to join at any time if they need be and having a dedicated phone number to call in the days following the workshop if any participants wanted to debrief with someone who was not a member of the research team. The phone number was included on every power point slide shown during the workshop, so participants had ready access to it.
- The workshops were developed as safe spaces for young women and gender-diverse people with lived experience of homelessness. That meant that only members of the research team with lived expertise joined the workshops, with the exception of one note taker.
- Each participant received a cash honourarium, a gift card for food delivery (i.e., Skip the Dishes), and a care package provided by a local gift shop, containing items such as a journal with a positive message on the cover, colorful pens, stickers, a bookmark and soap leaves.
- Each workshop began with ice-breaker questions and ended with a fun activity, such as word games and dancing, to ensure the workshops were spaces of comfort and relationship building.
- The research team held a mid-way check point after the fourth workshop to debrief with one another and troubleshoot any challenges we were facing

The workshops were a success, providing helpful insight into different solutions for ameliorating loneliness and isolation for young women and gender-diverse people as they transition to housing. Still, some challenges manifested throughout the eight weeks of workshops. In facilitating group discussion, there were instances

where a participant made statements that were judgmental or discriminatory to others in the group. For example, during the workshop on ‘parenting’ one of the participants made a comment about how children need both a mother and a father present, and the lived expert researchers were palpably aware of the emotional impact this message could have on participants who identify as single parents. True to the findings on young people’s sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Thulien et al., 2019), at times participants made self-deprecating comments that were difficult to unpack in the group setting. However, discussions that followed such comments often seemed to lead to a greater sense of understanding and compassion amongst the participants and researchers. Lived expert researchers contacted participants immediately after any tensions arose during workshops, reminded them they could contact the team’s social worker and invited them to share any adverse impacts on their mental health. None of the participants reported lasting negative impacts from the workshops, despite acknowledging some challenging discussions and opposing opinions. There were also logistical challenges to conducting the workshops virtually during the pandemic, including but not limited to building rapport with participants and providing honourariums remotely.

Workshops were 90 minutes in length and received strong attendance overall. Many participants joined for most, or all of the workshops.

Item	Result
<b>Number of workshops held</b>	8
<b>Number of participants per workshop</b>	Ranging from 5–11
<b>Total number of participants across workshops</b>	58
<b>Total number of unique participants across workshops</b>	17

Figure 3

The findings and solutions described in the remainder of the report come largely from the solution–design workshops, where young people told us about the challenges they face when transitioning from homelessness to housing and what we should do about it.

### **Coding and Analysis**

Data from across all four phases of the research were coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2019). Research team members took analytic memos after each interview and workshop, and these memos provided initial sensitizing concepts through which initial codes were developed and analysis took place. Coding was primarily completed by the research assistants who engaged in inter–coder reliability exercises such as group coding to ensure consistency across the data (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020). The codebook was developed using some inductive but largely deductive codes. The data was coded using NVivo 12 software. The coded data was shared with the entire team to engage in co–analysis that took place over several phases for the duration of the project. Most notably, the research team held analytic meetings as the eight themes for the workshops were being conceptualized and developed.



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# WHAT WE LEARNED



## Responding to young women & gender diverse youth transitioning to housing

# LONELINESS

Loneliness negatively impacts young people's housing stability.

Young women and gender diverse youth described loneliness in different ways:

- Feeling empty or alienated
- Alone when around other people
- Having too much time to themselves
- A lack of meaningful connection with others

## Changes Needed

### ACCESSIBILITY

Transportation & technology provisions



### PERSONAL/RELATIONAL

Increase & diversify wellness & mental health supports

### SYSTEMIC

Building socially inclusive communities



### SCENARIO

A youth immigrates away from family and social networks. She stays at a shelter where she has little privacy and feels judged by others. She doesn't have a data plan and can't call home often. Meanwhile, the youth must navigate confusing bureaucratic processes to access essential resources and rights, and feels alone as she tries to manage finding housing, going to school, and more.

## LONELINESS

Young people's understanding of, and experiences with, loneliness and isolation are at the heart of this research project. Loneliness permeates almost every facet of their lives – their sense of home, feelings of safety, mental and physical wellness, and connection with the community at large. These factors have a profound impact on young women and gender-diverse youth's housing stability (Nichols et al., 2017; Perron et al., 2014).

*Social isolation* describes the number of connections people have.

*Loneliness* describes the quality of the connections people have.

We often think about older adults as the population who are the most lonely; in fact, gen Z, and young women specifically, identify as the loneliest demographic. In a national study, upwards of 60% of young women noted not having someone to talk to when they needed it (*isolation*) and 60% indicated feeling alone even when they were around other people (*loneliness*) (Angus Reid, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic increased these experiences of loneliness and isolation for everyone, but especially for women and young people (Abacus, 2020; McMaster, 2020).

The young people in this project described feelings of loneliness acutely. Most of them described being *lonely* more than being alone. Many of the youth were surrounded by people – roommates, neighbours, landlords, other youth and staff in transitional housing, a partner – but still felt alone. They described having people to chat with, but rarely people who they can talk to deeply, who understands them, and who can support them.

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*Most of us have a lot of people around us, which makes us feel... You can tell someone I am feeling lonely and they say oh go talk to this person or that person. But talking to those people is a distraction and only keeps you busy at that moment. If you feel like, that connection, bond, it's not there... I think that is being lonely. – Nadia*

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Most youth described ongoing loneliness in their lives. That is, they were disconnected before experiencing homelessness, while homeless, and these conditions and feelings continued, and in some instances grew worse, after they were housed. Some participants described navigating circumstances where their connection to others was dependent upon engagement in an activity (eg. substance use), or location (eg. shelter), that they would rather avoid.

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*It's an empty sad feeling for me, like I have nobody. Like I'm in the world by myself, there's nobody left. That is how I can describe it. – Pillar*

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Feelings of loneliness and isolation negatively impacted the young people's wellbeing and were a cause and consequence of their unstable living conditions. Additionally, some youth described how their loneliness, and/or past experiences of loss and abandonment, made them more likely hold onto connections with individuals and environments that cause them harm. Importantly, each young person we spoke with had different solutions that would work for them to improve their sense of connection. Some solutions were embedded within the homeless community itself, such as consistent and flexible support groups and increased understanding and support from workers they interact with. Most solutions to loneliness, however, were about finding and building community more broadly. The young people we spoke with were interested in creating connections based on their social location (i.e., ethno-cultural identity, as parents, etc.) and interests (i.e., hobbies, skills, etc.) rather than seeking community based on their status or shared experiences as homeless. Relatedly, youth noted ways to ameliorate systematic barriers for them to build their own connections, such as access to technology (phone data, reliable internet access, laptops), and cost-effective and practical public transportation options.



## Responding to young women & gender diverse youth transitioning to housing

# SAFETY

Exiting the streets does not assure safety. Young women and gender diverse youth can feel unsafe in their housing, building, or neighbourhood, making them more likely to isolate and experience loneliness.

### Changes Needed

#### ACCESSIBILITY

Create 24 hour drop-in 'safe spaces'



#### PERSONAL/RELATIONAL

Regularly check in with youth about their feelings of safety

#### SYSTEMIC

Disrupt harmful gender ideologies that make young women and gender diverse youth targets for violence



#### SCENARIO

A youth moves from couch surfing to their own apartment where they do not know anyone and there are no youth drop-ins where they can access resources or be with peers. The youth avoids leaving their unit because an older male neighbour is always lurking in the hallway. When the youth tries exploring their environment, they're subjected to wolf-whistles and catcalls from passing cars.

## SAFETY

Housing does not necessarily create a sense of safety for many young women and gender-diverse youth exiting homelessness. Some young people described feeling more unsafe in their building or neighbourhood than they felt being in the youth shelter. Other evidence shows that young women and gender-diverse people are unsafe in their homes, especially when housing is only affordable when shared with a roommate or romantic partner (Mayock et al., 2016). Youth also risk victimization from private landlords who are in positions of power and can take advantage of youths' isolation. Domestic violence increased during the pandemic when it was significantly more difficult for victims to leave unsafe homes (Godin, 2020; Mahase, 2020; Schwan et al., 2020). To avoid people or areas where they do not feel safe, some youth will remain in their unit and this can increase their feelings of loneliness.

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*Honestly, with the landlord's husband, I don't really trust going out alone at night. I have PTSD from abuse and stuff by men, I just, I personally can't. My friend as well, she absolutely cannot be alone outside at night. And that just kind of sucks cause then we kind of constantly have to be looking behind our back if we're simply going out for a smoke. – Marie*

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Throughout the various phases of the research, we facilitated the conversation so that young people could define safety for themselves and point to whatever factors impact their sense of safety. Participants described a wide range of situations that

negatively affect their feelings of safety, including: alternatives to policing.

- Being judged and harmed by stigma and discrimination
- Unsafe living situations such as mold or lack of adequate COVID protocols in communal spaces
- Unsafe relationships, both romantic and platonic
- Neighbours who made them uncomfortable or who were aggressive
- Unsafe communities with inadequate supports
- An unsafe society at large

These feelings of unsafety are experienced intersectionally, across genders, race, ethnicity, and ability.

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*Whenever I walk somewhere, I usually have a knife with me or some kind of protection. Overall I do not feel safe as a trans woman in this city. – Niveen*

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Although we did not ask participants in the interviews or workshops about police, young women and gender-diverse youth regularly brought up how law enforcement decreases their sense of safety—or at the very least fails to alleviate feelings of unsafety. Given the well-known and well-documented discriminatory targeting of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour by police (Owusu-Bempah, 2017; Palmater, 2016; Wortley, 2019), racialized participants were most likely to bring up being scared of police. That said, one racialized participant saw a way forward, suggesting that police should do more to build trust in communities, such as by hosting sports games with local youth. While the research team cautions against interventions that can obscure police violence (for example, by misrepresenting police as ‘friends in uniforms’), our findings indicate a need to invest in safe

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*Most of the time, if I think I’ll call the police they won’t do anything, safety is our own hands. – Workshop participant*

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During these same conversations, many young people recounted stories of how they could not rely on strangers to help either if they experienced harassment or violence in public. Some youth described perceived and material dangers associated with walking at night, navigating streets filled with visible substance use and chaotic scenes of urban homelessness, as well as public transportation and private taxi services where both drivers and riders were sometimes sexually violent. As such, and as Niveen describes, they have to protect themselves, such as carrying safety tools like mace or weapons, which can lead to criminalization (Huey, 2012). Other participants described having a buddy system to check in with a friend or only leave their home in pairs, which is not an option for some youth with few social connections and can lead to isolation for others. Rather than having to manage their safety all on their own, youth noted that support people should be aware that being housed does not necessarily mean that genuine risk of victimization nor feelings of unsafety are eliminated. They may require ongoing check in and support to increase their feelings of safety, including for example, help building their social network and the provision of safe transportation to and from work. They also noted that having safe and accessible spaces to be and connect with others would support their feelings of safety. Ultimately, the solution is social transformation that prevents gender-based violence (Ending Violence Association of Canada, 2021).



Responding to young women & gender diverse youth transitioning to housing

# REFUGEE & NEWCOMER

The diverse needs of young women and gender diverse youth who come to Canada are largely unmet across systems. Youth feel alone, without culturally safe spaces, and face discrimination.

## Changes Needed

### ACCESSIBILITY

Establish 'Sanctuary Cities'



### PERSONAL/RELATIONAL

Increase language supports and ensure diversity among service providers

### SYSTEMIC

Identify and reject racist structures, policies, and practices



### SCENARIO

A youth arrives in Canada, undocumented, with nowhere to go. They are unable to access healthcare, education, and other essential services. They stay at a shelter, where they don't have shampoo that works for their hair. They must navigate the immigration process and daily life in a new country, often without adequate language support and while being subjected to various forms of racism and discrimination. When they show up to view a unit, they are told it is not available when it had been just hours before.

## NEWCOMER

Among the people we spoke with, the youth who were new to Canada described some of the most severe cases of isolation, being disconnected from their family, language, culture, and any sense of belonging. While they used terms like "exciting" "hopeful" and "adventurous" about their move to Canada, it was also filled with challenges and was more difficult than they had imagined. Approximately 10% of youth experiencing homelessness were born outside of Canada, and of those, 25% came to the country in the last five years (Gaetz et al., 2016). Most of the young people in this study were completely on their own, with no one to offer guidance while in Canada. Many participants described arriving at Pearson International Airport in Toronto and having no plan as to where to go or what to do. All of them ended up in an emergency shelter early on in their transition to Canada.

In their time in Canada, all of the newcomer youth described instances of racism and discrimination that had a direct impact on their access to housing, services, and their sense of belonging. Youth told us about other youth in the shelter rejecting them and bullying them.

*I wasn't born here. English is not my first language. So I don't know how to speak English very well but I still try. And obviously I'm from Bangladesh so I have an accent because I am here for three years. So [other youth shelter residents] were bullying me because of how I speak. They say, "oh you don't know how to speak English perfectly". "Look at your accent" and stuff. And "you're so ugly". They said that. "You don't do things, you are not cool". And I was so sad because I was already not going to my school or*

*my work [due to COVID] and I was feeling so hopeless that I would go to my room and start crying, like I was crying so loudly that I just have to get it out. – Sahini*

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For many newcomer youth, building friends and finding community in Canada was exceptionally difficult. Discrimination was also experienced more subtly, where the services and supports available to young women and gender-diverse youth did not meet their needs. Youth reported not seeing staff that looked like them, spoke their language, or understood their culture. For example, youth told us about some of the shelters they stayed at not having shampoo meant for Black hair. Importantly, some participants described how attaining housing with individuals with a shared ethnic identity should not be assumed to guarantee their safety—indicating that accessibility to a diversity of supports is fundamental.

Exiting shelters into housing was very difficult for newcomer youth who often faced discrimination from landlords. Being young, racialized, a newcomer, and in some cases a parent, made navigating the housing market exceptionally difficult. These stories are in keeping with recent research from the Canadian Centre for Housing Rights (2022) that revealed that racialized women newcomers experienced 30% more discrimination from landlords than non-racialized women newcomers. When these same racialized women newcomers disclosed having a child to potential landlords, they faced 563% increase in discrimination than non-parents.

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*It is difficult because you have a lot of people helping but when you get there the landlords say they don't take coloured people or these people...they are being racist. – Workshop participant*

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While all the young people we spoke with had accessed some services, young women and gender-diverse youth who came to Canada as refugees spoke about the inaccessibility of support until they received residency status. Participants described arriving at the airport with no idea where to seek out essential services. Various forms of health care, education, employment, and social services were denied to them because they did not hold permanent resident status. As such, one of the key recommendations from youth was establishing more robust sanctuary cities to ensure access to much needed services. Young people also noted breaking down overt and covert racism and discrimination by making spaces and supports more culturally safe and appropriate and intentionally designing policies and practices with the aim of dismantling racism.



## Responding to young women & gender diverse youth transitioning to housing

# HOUSING

Young women and gender diverse people regularly face negative experiences with landlords and a lack of choice over housing type, location, and quality.

### Changes Needed

#### ACCESSIBILITY

Drastically increase the availability and quality of public housing and ensure choice



#### PERSONAL/RELATIONAL

Provide education on tenant rights, financial literacy, and human rights

#### SYSTEMIC

Reject unbridled financialization of housing and uphold housing as a human right



### SCENARIO

After years of waiting on the social housing registry, a youth is offered a unit; however, they're also told that if they do not accept this unit, they will be removed from the list. The unit is nowhere near their school, doctor, or friends. They move into the housing they've been offered but don't feel safe in their building and it's far away from the community centre they go to. The youth would rather have moved into their friend's place, but they are under constant threat of illegal eviction.

## HOUSING

Across social locations, young women and gender-diverse people spoke at length about how precarious their housing was after exiting homelessness. Most of the housing options were in various states of disrepair, in buildings and neighbourhoods that felt unsafe, in locations that did not meet their needs, and with tenancies that lacked permanency and stability. The typical renting experience – finding a unit, signing a lease with a landlord, having tenancy rights, and maintaining that housing for at least a year before the lease renewal, was uncommon among participants. Instead, housing more commonly looked like:

- Moving in with a family member or friend, with no clarity on how long they were welcome
- Renting a bedroom in a unit leased by someone else, sometimes a friend but often a stranger
- Bouncing from one short-term sublet (a month or two) to another, in a constant cycle of displacement
- A transitional housing program with a time limit
- An intimate partner acting as the key source of housing security

Youth described in detail various states of insecurity and uncertainty, and many of them would not be protected by tenant rights because of the informality of their tenancy and the lack of tenant protections in transitional housing (Fleming et al., 2019). For many people, their housing was predicated on maintaining positive relationships with an intimate partner or a friend, without which they would become homeless. This leaves young women and gender-diverse people vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and violence in their attempt to avoid absolute homelessness (Maki, 2017). For others, living



with strangers increased their feelings of loneliness and made their home feel less safe and secure.

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*I just got to this place. With the roommate, I don't know. She's here, we're talking, but we don't talk much and she's not here usually at the same time I am here. That's kind of good cause I like my alone time and I feel like I need to leave whenever she is here. – Ginger*

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All of the participants described challenges accessing and maintaining safe, permanent, and appropriate housing; these obstacles were experienced intersectionally with racialized young people facing racist behaviour (Noble et al., 2022). The young women and gender-diverse people of colour we spoke with shared instances of overt and covert racism on the part of potential landlords when seeking to rent a unit, thereby limiting their housing options or having to lease from prejudiced landlords. Likewise, young parents experienced discriminatory actions from potential landlords who refused to rent to someone with children or who misinterpreted (or weaponized) occupancy standards concerning shared bedrooms to deny someone the unit, for example, incorrectly assuming that children of different genders under the age of five are not allowed to share a room.

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*Nowadays landlords they are just bullshit. Every time I go on Kijiji they ask about your background. They ask about your credit, like I get it. Asking about my employment and all that but like, not asking what's my background. Where I come from and all that. Why does that matter? – Fabia*

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The units that young participants were able to rent were often in a state of disrepair, with infestations, mould, non-working appliances, draft, or other conditions that made living there

difficult and, in some cases, had an adverse effect on their health. Youth articulated that the work they had to do to simply maintain their housing and live in these poor conditions occupied their time and energy and made them embarrassed to have friends over. **It is clear that unstable, unsafe, and poor housing contributes to young women and gender-diverse people's loneliness and isolation.**

The youth who participated in this research wanted access to affordable, safe, clean housing, and choice – elements that are fundamental to the human right to housing (Keepers of the Circle, 2022; Women's National Housing & Homelessness Network, 2022). Participants described how choice was not a factor that determined their housing because the combination of unaffordability, low vacancy, discrimination, and competition for units meant they had to accept whatever landlord accepted their application first. They noted that different types of housing models in multiple neighbourhoods would allow the housing system to adequately respond to their needs and would ultimately allow them to be safer, healthier, happier, and more connected to their community. **Not only do we need new and more affordable housing options, but young women and gender-diverse people asked for support in maintaining the housing they do have.** This is why, led by our lived expert research team members, we partnered with the Canadian Centre for Housing Rights to provide a free tenant rights workshop for the young people in this study. More of these opportunities are necessary to educate, support, and empower youth to assert their housing rights—yet such responses place onus on the individual to address injustices that are structural and require systemic change to combat. Moreover, tenant rights need to be extended to various kinds of living conditions, including subletting and transitional housing. Knowing one's rights is not enough to ensure youth will maintain their housing because, as one workshop participant explained, self-advocacy and the enactment of one's rights requires knowledge, labour, rigorous documentation, co-ordination, and resources.



## Responding to young women & gender diverse youth transitioning to housing

# PARENTING

Young women and gender diverse youth are sometimes excluded from housing, employment, education, and other opportunities due to their status as parents. Caring for children without supports can be very isolating.

## Changes Needed

### ACCESSIBILITY

Allow flexible employment terms and access to affordable/free childcare, and barrier-free access to all types of birth control



### PERSONAL/RELATIONAL

Create safe spaces for young parents to spend time together

### SYSTEMIC

Expand our cultural ideas about what it means to be a young parent and where children belong



### SCENARIO

A youth manages to secure housing for herself and her child but constantly feels judged by others because she is a single parent. The youth applies to several jobs but doesn't know how she would sustain the employment if she was hired since childcare is unaffordable. At the same time, she feels very lonely but afraid to make social connections that could end up a risk to herself or her child.

## PARENTING

Six of the participants in this study identified as parents and all had access to their children, although two parents did not live with their children full time. While some young people had a lot of access to support as part of a young mothers housing program, other people had virtually no support and were on their own to navigate young adulthood, parenting, and living independently.

Feeling judged and stigmatized dominated the conversation from young parents. Whether it be as a young parent, a single parent, or raising their children in the housing or neighbourhood they could afford, many of the young parents we spoke with internalized the negative, unfair, and disparaging attitude they received from others. Participants often measured their own success as a parent based on heterosexual, middle class ideals. Parenting young children can be isolating in the best of times (Kent-Marvick et al., 2022) but the parents with histories of homelessness and housing instability experienced heightened isolation and disconnection from others when they became parents. Some described losing relationships with friends who were not at the same life stage as they were, having few spaces tailored for young people where they felt welcome with their children, and having to be very selective of who they interacted with to keep their children safe. Some youth had family who played a big role in supporting them and their children, while others had no support network to rely on.

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*My ex partner, we took care of my child together and when we broke up, they just stopped checking for her and it was... they left me to do everything so it was really hard for*

*me 'cause she's on me constantly and she's still breastfeeding. So sometimes I get overwhelmed or depressed by it. I get really upset. – Pillar*

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Young parents, especially those without a strong support network, found it nearly impossible to participate in education and employment opportunities or even to access some services. Others understood aloneness as a way to protect their children from potentially harmful situations. Almost all of the participants relied exclusively on informal childcare support, usually family, friends, or people in their building to watch their children when necessary. In reality, most of the youth tried to complete work, school work, and all the tasks related to maintaining their housing with their children in their laps. This makes it challenging to focus, complete tasks, and build professional relationships. It is no wonder then that some young parents found it too difficult to juggle and did not pursue employment or education so they could focus on their children. Given how vital education and employment are in terms of places to build friendships and connections, the inaccessibility of these spaces to young parents has implications for young women and gender-diverse people in terms of social connection, building their social network, future employment opportunities, and income generation.

All of these challenges were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The isolation that young parents described prior to the pandemic was exacerbated by lockdowns and restrictions. **The youth in this study went to extraordinary lengths to keep their children safe, often at profound personal cost.** One young person who

needed to access an emergency shelter during the pandemic isolated herself from her child due to their heightened risk of contracting COVID and in an effort to keep their child safe.

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*Because I don't really trust people to watch my son. So daycare is the only place he goes when I'm not there. But before [COVID] you know friends, or his dad, anybody used to come over and watch him. I feel more comfortable with people watching him at home. So now it's like I can't have nobody watch him. – Serena*

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Providing young people with affordable and accessible childcare is paramount to advancing the educational and employment opportunities for young people with children, and this will often improve social connection. Additionally, spaces that are designed to support young people, including community centres, drop-in spaces, and homeless-serving organizations need to formally include young people and their children and ensure that their spaces are welcoming and inclusive of young parents. Above all, young parents asked for acceptance, understanding, and support while navigating parenthood.



## Responding to young women & gender diverse youth transitioning to housing

# COVID-19

For many young women and gender diverse youth the pandemic meant disconnection from formal and informal resources and overtime, reconnection has not been uniform

### Changes Needed

#### ACCESSIBILITY

Ensure choice between online and in-person supports and provide resources to engage in whichever way they choose



#### PERSONAL/RELATIONAL



Ensure regulations around health matters are clear and youth have access to resources so they can feel comfortable and safe

#### SYSTEMIC

Use various forms of emergency funding to create long-term solutions i.e. basic income & building affordable housing



#### SCENARIO

A youth was seeing a free counsellor before the pandemic but became disconnected when the lockdowns began. The youth couldn't access the online supports because they didn't have private wifi. At the same time, they lost their job due to COVID-19 and because they had been paid under the table, were not eligible for emergency government support. They want to find a job but is afraid to leave their apartment since they don't fully understand the public health regulations and do not have access to mental health support.

## COVID-19

All of the conversations we had with young women and gender-diverse people happened during COVID-19 – both at the beginning of the pandemic and then a year later when we were all well-versed in masks, sanitizer, and social distancing. Despite the rapid changes in our knowledge about and how to respond to COVID-19, the pandemic and its social and economic fallout continue to impact the lives of youth experiencing homelessness.

**The pandemic magnified pre-existing social inequities.** People who were already struggling to make ends meet, who had unreliable employment, and whose housing situation was precarious felt the impact of COVID-19 the most. Young people across the country struggled with social isolation (McMaster, 2020). Young women were among the most likely to lose their job, the slowest to regain employment when lockdowns lifted, and were at increased risk of experiencing violence in their home (Noble et al., 2022; Schwan et al., 2020).

Noble et al. (2022) identified several key consequences of the pandemic on youth experiencing homelessness in Canada: a disruption or complete loss of services; a negative impact on employment, education, housing, and meeting basic needs; decreased mental wellbeing and increased substance use; and increased surveillance and discrimination. These findings are echoed in this study.

Youth had differing perspectives on how COVID-19 impacted their lives. Some young people described minimal disruption – they continued to see people, go places, and didn't feel disconnected. A few young people found they enjoyed the pause and time for reflection with one young person saying it let them "reconstruct themselves." For one participant, the struggle and turmoil

of her life as a precariously housed young person made the COVID-19 pandemic simply one more issue of life and death to contend with.

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*My life has always been chaotic okay. So dealing with chaos is nothing really new to me. So I'm on the terms where if I die I die. And that's really it. – Josie*

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Many of the young people we spoke to told us about the significant negative impact that COVID had on their lives. Young women and gender-diverse youth told us about losing their job as well as housing loss because roommates or landlords either moved back into the place they were renting or saw them as a potential carrier of COVID and so kicked them out. This disconnection from so many tethers to social life left many young women and gender-diverse people feeling lost, without purpose, and disengaged from friends and acquaintances.

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*The nice elderly woman who I was living with. Her grandson moved back in because of COVID. He lost his job, he couldn't afford rent anymore. So that's how I lost my room. Before she wanted to keep me but when it comes to her actual family there wasn't much choice. – Echo*

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Even among the young people who had a positive view of COVID-19, almost everyone noted how they lost access to services and supports during lockdowns and afterwards, and that virtual alternatives were either inaccessible because many had spotty access to a working phone, laptop, or wifi, or didn't work for them. COVID-19

led to material deprivation as well; for example, a workshop participant described how, because she received the Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB) she was cut off from social assistance, which paid for her medication, and so now she cannot access the medication she needs.

As we move onto managing the social and economic fallout of COVID-19, young people offered a range of suggestions on how to improve services, such as continuing to offer virtual and in-person options, as well as the means for youth to make the most of these supports. Some of the distress and anxiety from COVID-19 came from unclear communication and conflicting rules and regulations. An important learning from young people is that all guidelines and rules around health and other issues should be explained so they understand the objective of the regulations and why they are necessary. Participants also spoke at length about having a broader, more transformative vision as we assess the world we want to live in post-COVID – one that prioritizes housing and health for everyone.



## Responding to young women & gender diverse youth transitioning to housing

# SUPPORT PEOPLE

Informal support people and service providers provide aid to homeless and precariously housed youth. They offer a unique perspective on what we can do to champion young women and gender diverse people

## Changes Needed

### ACCESSIBILITY

Ensure services are accessible through access to technology and transportation. Offer gender-safe spaces and programs



### PERSONAL/RELATIONAL

Build capacity for support people to regularly check in on youth, assess risk and to help youth develop safety planning measures

### SYSTEMIC

Build community outside of the homeless sector, encourage mutual aid and informal support. Ensure all efforts are intersectional



### SCENARIO

A young adult became aware of the huge service gaps for youth caused by COVID-19. Having previously been homeless, they understand how devastating it can be to lose supports. Together with a couple of friends, they create social media posts, reach out to community find out who is in need, and in their small living room, create individual care packages. Their mutual aid work takes off and more people offer to help cook food, get supplies, and make deliveries. They get to know the youth and begin to support them to reach their unique goals. Without some financial backing though, they aren't sure how much longer they can provide support.

## SUPPORT PERSON

In addition to interviewing with young people transitioning from homelessness to housing, we spoke with 12 support people who provided assistance to young women and gender-diverse people before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It was important for this project that we hear from both formal support people, such as service providers, and informal support people – people who provide mutual aid and support without being paid and without organizational affiliation. These mutual aid strategies existed and were crucial long before the pandemic, especially for people who have been harmed, discriminated against, and excluded by some formalized institutions. Informal support is based on relationships and often increases the dignity and sense of agency people have in their lives and connection to one another. The interviews provided a rich source of material to understand the gaps and barriers to providing support to youth who are homeless or precariously housed, and the extraordinary lengths support people go to in order to offer aid and build up young people. Insights from the support people echoed the narratives provided by youth and also offered helpful context about the systems challenges and structural failures that young women and gender-diverse people experience.

Support people called for services that meet the needs of young women and gender-diverse people specifically, especially given the shifting service delivery landscape during and following the pandemic. Offering different ways of accessing support, both virtual and in person options, allow supporters to reach more people in a way that works for them. **For this range of options to work, however, access to technology and transportation are key, including low-**

**cost or free transportation and accessible internet and devices.** Several support people also noted the lack of emergency shelters specific to young women and young queer youth. Indeed, only 13% of all emergency shelters in Canada are women-specific (Schwan et al., 2020) and this does not account for youth.

Many young women and gender-diverse people who are transitioning to housing require aid, in particular mental health support, that can address their uniquely gendered experiences with sensitivity and understanding. These services must engage intersectionally to support the whole person. Support people advised that a robust system of support and care will improve young people's wellbeing, relationships, and social network and ultimately reduce loneliness and isolation.

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*I would say that young racialized women and individuals who are LGBT face additional barriers just in terms of accessing services in our community, having targeted services for young women who have experienced sexual violence, domestic violence, human trafficking. – Social worker*

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Young people and support persons alike identified safety as one of the most significant challenges facing young women and gender-diverse people transitioning to housing. Putting safety at top of mind for people providing support is key. Offering safety planning measures and assessments to young people can keep the conversation around safety at the forefront of interactions and offer a space for youth to share concerns they have. Relatedly, support people suggested that regular check-ins with youth can increase feelings of safety as well as belonging and connection. These check-ins are meant to be informal and include an activity, such as going for a walk. Having consistent opportunities to talk with someone they are comfortable with can foster feelings of social inclusion.

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*I meet all of my youth outside and we put a picnic table and we wear a mask and I am able to provide support. I'm able to provide them with basic human interaction and I think we need to change what the narrative of support looks like of somebody coming and having to ask for help. – Housing worker*

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The support people we spoke with had a strong vision for building community. The overarching goal is to foster relationships and promote mutual aid so that we do not have to rely on formalized, institutionalized programming to offer support. This orientation mirrors that of Black and Latinx social movement organizers who promote grassroots engagement to avoid the pitfalls of institutional bureaucratization and having to potentially filter messages or activities (Incite!, 2007). A challenge with formalized, professional support is that it can leave some young people feeling like they are a 'client' 'number' or 'pay cheque' and connecting with them is simply fulfilling a task as part of the worker's job. **Informal support and promoting mutual aid can allow relationships to build organically and allows young women and gender-diverse people to find and maintain trusting relationships with people they have a connection with.** However, individuals attempting to support marginalised community members often lack access to resources and training that could optimise their efforts as well as help protect helpers from burnout. Informal relationships can potentially allow youth to build positive relationships with formal supports in the future — especially when helpers are able to make connections with and gain mentorship from organizations and professionals — but that is not the primary objective of such relationships.

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*I think, to access an informal support, as opposed to a formal support. There's a lot of internal barriers to accessing formal support. The best way I found to connect the young people with formal support*

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*is through informal support. Like make that peer connection first, build the trust over, essentially a period of time, like you can't make trust and connections within a couple of months. And then using that trust to like actually connect the youth to formal support. – Informal support person*

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Formal or informal, lived expert or ally, the support people in this project made it clear that young women and gender-diverse youth deserve respect, support, connection, and care and that these fundamental pillars will allow young people to thrive in their housing and lives. Loneliness and isolation exist because of structural and systemic inequities that are experienced intersectionally. Building truly inclusive spaces, programs, and communities for young women and gender-diverse people will improve belonging and wellbeing.



# SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

Our aim in this project is to explore young women and gender-diverse people's experiences of loneliness and isolation as they transition from homelessness to housing. Feelings of loneliness and disconnection matter. They stem from, and contribute to, feelings of unsafety, housing precarity, mental distress, and inequity. Identifying feelings of loneliness and taking action to improve a sense of belonging can increase housing stability, and vice versa. As we have learned in this research, addressing loneliness and isolation cannot be an afterthought – it must be integral to all housing and support work being done in and beyond the homelessness sector. Our much more ambitious goal in this research is to call for a radical transformation in our understanding of community, how it is built, and who belongs. All efforts towards social inclusion must respond to the uniquely gendered context faced by young women and gender-diverse youth.

## ACCESSIBILITY

- Improve access to free or low-cost transportation and technology provision
- Invest in and create 24-hour, low-barrier, gender inclusive drop in safe spaces for youth, and support youth to build and foster meaningful community on their own terms
- Establish Sanctuary Cities and 'don't Ask, Don't Tell' policies across services and supports for young people experiencing homelessness
- Drastically increase investment in public housing specifically dedicated to young people and their families to expand its availability and quality, and ensure youth have choice in their housing
- Allow flexible employment terms and access to affordable/free childcare, and barrier-free access to sexual and reproductive health care for all young people
- Ensure choice between online and in-person supports and provide resources to engage in whichever they choose
- Invest in programs that improve access to essential technological resources such as internet, computers, and phones
- Evaluate and revise programs, services, and housing for youth to ensure they are gender-safe spaces and ensure these programs are designed in consultation with people who have lived and living experiences of homelessness

## PERSONAL/RELATIONAL

- Increase investment in and diversify wellness and mental health supports that are anti-oppressive, rights-based, and strengths focused
- Once housed, support services must regularly check in with youth about their feelings of safety and help youth develop safety planning measures
- Increase language supports and translation services within youth programs, services, and housing and ensure diversity across social locations among service providers
- Provide young people with education on tenant rights, financial literacy, and human rights within mainstream public education systems and within programs targeted to young people with lived experience of homelessness and/or housing precarity
- Invest in and create safe spaces for young

parents, particularly for those who face socio-economic marginalization, homelessness, or who lack social supports

- Ensure public health regulations are clear and youth have access to resources so they can feel comfortable and safe (i.e. the provision of masks)
- Invest in, providing resourcing, and build capacity for support people to regularly check in on youth, assess risk and assets and to help youth to improve their safety, wellbeing and achieve their self-identified goals

## SYSTEMIC

- Develop strategies for building inclusive communities where youth can easily access information from local organisations and service providers on practical pathways to forging and maintaining healthy connections. This might include mentorship programs, groups for young parents that feature childcare, reducing barriers to education and employment, and addressing racism, gender-based discrimination, and substance use stigma
- Disrupt harmful gender ideologies that make young women and gender-diverse youth targets for violence

- Identify and reject racist structures, policies, and practices. For example, by creating accessible accountability measures for landlords who are discriminatory and by ensuring that newcomers have access to formal peer supports and other professionals that can assist them, and advocate for them, when navigating complicated systems such as health care and social assistance
- Reject unbridled financialization of housing and uphold housing as a human right
- Expand our cultural ideas about what it means to be a young parent and where children belong. For example, by normalising the inclusion of, and support for, children in employment and education settings when parents are unable to access much needed childcare
- Use various forms of emergency funding to create long-term solutions i.e. basic income and building affordable housing
- Build community outside of the homeless sector, encourage mutual aid and informal support. Ensure all efforts are intersectional



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## **THE LONELINESS PROJECT**

**Responding to young women & gender-diverse youth transitioning to housing**