

RECONNECTING WITH FAMILY AND COMMUNITY: PATHWAYS OUT OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Daphne WINLAND

What do you need to know?

Adolescent development is generally viewed as a gradual process that is guided by supportive adults, particularly family members. This focus shifts however, when we think about homeless youth and family becomes viewed as the 'problem', and youth are pushed to become 'self-sufficient'. However, this oversimplifies the nature and composition of families and relationships. More importantly, it overlooks families as potential partners in working towards solutions to youth homelessness. Although approximately 2/3 of youth leave home due to family conflict and abuse, it cannot be assumed that all family members contribute to this dynamic, or that all relationships are irreconcilable. While it is not always possible or desirable to reunite some of the youth with their families, it is important to develop programs that aim to deal with and/or resolve conflicts with family when possible. Previous research suggests that youth who reunite with their families have more positive outcomes than those who do not, including in school, employment, self-esteem, criminal behaviour and family relationships. Developing programs for family reconnection should therefore be a central component of a systems-based, preventative approach to youth homelessness, where programs, services and service delivery systems are organized at every level.

What did the researcher do?

The methodology for this research consisted of three components. First, interviews were conducted with staff of Eva's Family Reconnect program (FRP), including counselling staff and the Clinical Consultant who provides

support to the Family Reconnect team. Second, a series of interviews were conducted with both youth and family members who participated in the program. Finally, five years of data from Eva's Initiatives was analyzed.

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?



This chapter reports on research conducted with the Family Reconnect Program, part of Eva's Initiatives in Toronto. The program offers youth (16-24) who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless, opportunities to rebuild relationships with family through participation in individual and/or family therapy. Examples of coordinated 'system-levels' responses conducted in the UK and Australia are discussed in this chapter, and recommendations for various levels of government are provided.

ARTICLE SOURCE

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What did the researcher find?

This research reveals key gaps in our understanding of the relationship between family breakdown or conflict, and youth homelessness. It strongly suggests that not all young people who are homeless are permanently alienated from all of their family members, and that **many young people continue to maintain ties with family members and the communities they left** (69% in this sample). A wide variety of situations were revealed, including some rela-

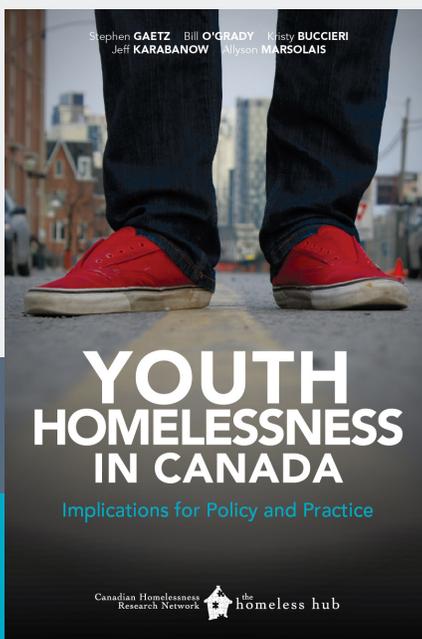
tionships that were irreconcilable, and others where family members needed a period to cool off or think things through. In some cases, the necessary intervention and supports allowed family members to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of their conflict, such as when an undiagnosed mental health concern or learning disability was present. After participating in the Family Reconnect Program, 62% of participants became more

actively involved with family members and 14.5% reconciled a damaged relationship with a family member. Many youth also reported developing a better understanding and appreciation of the conditions that forced them to leave, helping them to move forward in their lives. Many youth were able to build new skills and learn to access necessary supports in order to work toward long lasting, healthy and supportive relationships with family members.

What can we do with this research?

This research provides an important example of how the principles of family reconnection can be applied at a program level and highlights the importance of support for young people and their families in dealing with concerns such as mental health and learning disabilities. This research also demonstrates how the basic principles of the Family Reconnect Program can be applied more broadly at a 'systems level'. In contrast to developing an agency-based program or response, it is possible to approach the issue from a more integrated systems level, bringing together a range of services that work across the street youth sector, and ideally, engage with programs, services and institutions 'upstream' (before a young person becomes homeless). Effective family reconnection programs require collaboration between education, child welfare services, the mental health sector, housing, settlement and corrections. Examples are provided from the UK and Australia. Finally, this chapter can be used to advocate for an effective response to youth homelessness that balances prevention, emergency responses, and transitional supports to rapidly move people out of homelessness, and for increased services for youth under the age of 16.

About the researcher



DAPHNE WINLAND is Associate Professor of Anthropology. Her research reflects broadly focused interests in (trans) nationalism, diaspora, refugees, immigration and youth homelessness. Results of her Croatian research during the war in the Former Yugoslavia are presented in 'We are now a Nation': Croats Between 'Home' and 'Homeland' (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

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