

## Revealing and Closing the Gaps in Education Policies

**Youth homelessness is a serious issue that is often neglected in the Canadian school system.** Students who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness may feel excluded and unsupported, and struggle to stay and succeed in school (Schwan et al., 2018). This lack of support reflects a larger gap in the Canadian policy agenda.

We conducted a review of education policies across provincial/territorial and school district levels and found that none of these policies takes into account how homelessness and housing insecurity impact students' ability to stay in school. Some policies and measures related to inclusion, attendance and access were created to meet administrative needs instead of providing support and protection to vulnerable students.

Yet, research suggests that schools are central to preventing youth homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2018; Malenfant et al., 2020). They have a crucial role in identifying early signs of at-risk youth and coordinating support networks for effective interventions.

Every year, *at least* 35 000 youth experience homelessness in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2016). With the continuing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, housing crisis and weakening of the economy, combined with a generalized lack of resources and supports for schools and education workers, more and more youth are at risk of experiencing poverty and housing insecurity. It is crucial to identify and develop proactive measures and practices that explicitly consider students' needs and facilitate their access to school programs and services.

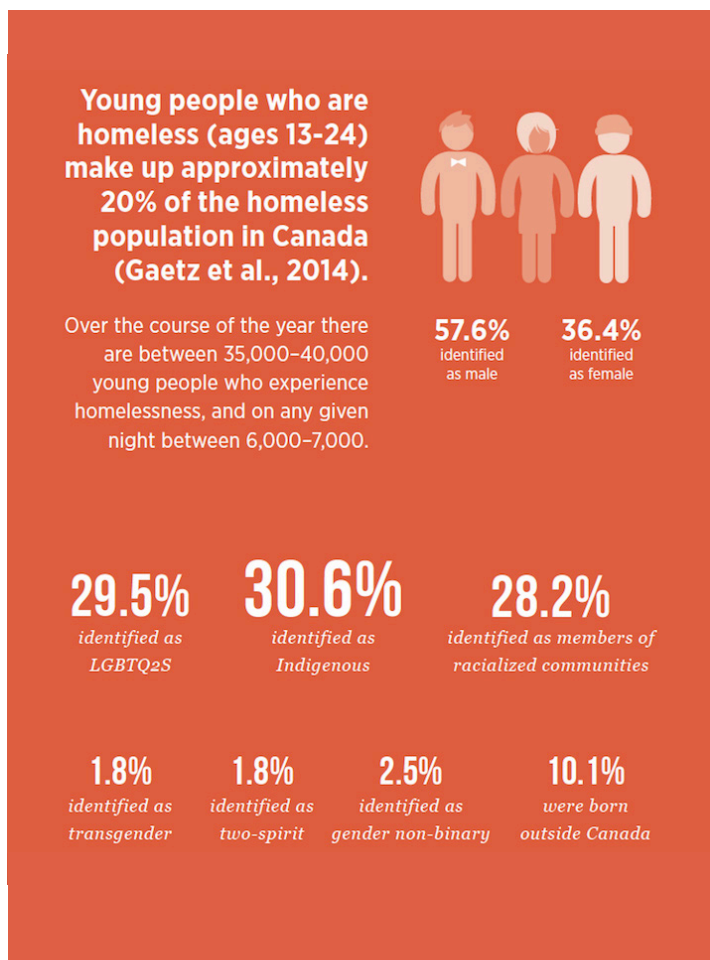
**The purpose of this policy brief is to highlight the gaps in Canadian education policies concerning youth homelessness prevention and intervention.** We urge school boards, community partners, education policymakers and provincial/territorial governments to work together to create comprehensive, up-to-date policies to address youth homelessness in schools.

## YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

**The problem of youth homelessness in Canada is largely underestimated because of a generalized lack of awareness of the multiple ways in which it can be experienced.**

One in five Canadians who did not complete high school has experienced unsheltered homelessness, meaning they have frequented shelters or lived in the streets or abandoned buildings (Uppal, 2022). Youth who experience hidden homelessness temporarily live with relatives or couch surf because they have nowhere else to live. Hidden homelessness has been experienced by 9% of Canadians over 25 who did not obtain university-level certifications (Statistics Canada, 2016).

One thing is clear: the likelihood of Canadian youth experiencing unsheltered or hidden homelessness decreases as their level of education increases.



**Figure 1:** Characteristics of Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Canada (Source: Gaetz, O’Grady, Kidd & Schwan, 2016, p.6).

## WHY EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MATTERS

**Youth with marginalized identities are more at risk of experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness than others.** Notably,

Indigenous youth who experience homelessness represent at least seven times the proportion of the general Indigenous youth population in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2016). Additionally, sexual minorities are twice as likely than heterosexual Canadians to experience unsheltered homelessness, and this is even more prevalent among young people (Uppal, 2022). Women, and even more so Black and sexual minority women, have greater difficulty meeting their needs than men (Uppal, 2022). Likewise, 2SLGBTQ+ Indigenous youth are more likely to “become homeless earlier, face more victimization in all contexts, and face greater mental health and addiction challenges” (Kidd et al., 2019, p. 169). People living with one or more disability are also significantly more at risk of housing insecurity and homelessness (Uppal, 2022).

Given the intersectional ways in which one's education and social background can impact the experience of homelessness, the following sections provide a jurisdictional scan of Canadian education policies relating to homelessness, equity, inclusion and diversity, as well as admission and attendance.

## 1. POLICIES ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY

**A review of Canadian education policies indicates that youth homelessness is rarely addressed. Despite troubling research findings, Canadian educational policies do not seem to recognize youth homelessness as a problem for students.**

The **Government of Alberta** is one of the few institutions that has taken steps to address youth homelessness through education initiatives. They have provided an online guideline with recommendations for school personnel to help them manage homelessness-related issues.<sup>1</sup> However, it is worth noting that this guideline is not mandated by a formal policy, and it does not provide schools with the necessary resources or personnel training to tackle the problem effectively.

Another example is a general policy on grants and contributions from the **Nunavut Department of Education**. The policy once provided “funds for initiatives that address homelessness in Nunavut”, but the most recent version of the policy no longer includes these grants (2008, p.18). Although it acknowledged the education system's role in supporting homelessness initiatives, it did not translate into ongoing in-school measures and practices for addressing youth homelessness.

The **Centre de services scolaire de la Capitale** (CSSC) in Quebec City has a poverty policy, but it does not specifically address homelessness. The policy, which came into effect in 2007, aims to deliver support and resources to institutions located in **underprivileged areas**. However, the interventions focus on school success, and no form of structural, financial or material support is included.

In summary, the reviewed policies suggest there is **limited recognition and understanding of youth homelessness**. Students who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness may not be identified or supported in a way that prevents them from no longer attending school.

*1. In contrast to all other educational organizations reviewed, the Government of Alberta's guideline explicitly recognizes the unique circumstances and challenges faced by homeless or housing insecure students. Recommended measures include building trusting relationships with students, raising awareness with their families, and supplying practical support to address issues of food, hygiene, transportation and access to social/health programs and services (Government of Alberta, n.d.).*

## 2. POLICIES ADDRESSING EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

**Several school policies and protocols include sections on preventing discrimination and recognizing equity, diversity and inclusion, but they rarely acknowledge these issues in relation to poverty, housing instability or homelessness.**

The policies we have reviewed address discrimination, inclusion and diversity, and express a commitment to protect and respect all individuals' sociocultural diversity. However, they fail to identify poverty, housing instability, or homelessness as related experiences that require intervention and support.

The **Greater Victoria School District** in British Columbia (2004, p.7) has set an example by explicitly recognizing homelessness as one of the many issues that gender and sexual minorities may face, particularly affecting transgender youth. Similarly, the **Winnipeg School Division's Accessibility Plan** (2016) acknowledges that "poverty" and "lack of adequate housing" are systemic barriers to education access for people living with disabilities. However, these policies do not provide clear measures to address poverty and housing issues, apart from mentioning that some unspecified support programs outside schools may help.

Although various forms of marginalization and discrimination have been recognized within education policies, there is still a lack of sensitivity toward the struggles of racialized and marginalized individuals living in poverty or experiencing homelessness. These policies do not effectively represent or address the unique challenges faced by those who are most vulnerable.

**Examples of school district/board policies that recognize inclusion and diversity or deal with discrimination** include the Montreal School Board's *Racial Incidents Policy* (2005) and *Multicultural/Multiracial Education Policy* (2005a), the New Brunswick Department of Education's *Policy 322: Inclusive Education*, the *Edmonton Public Schools* Administrative Regulation on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (2018) and the *Vancouver School Board* Policy on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities (2018).

EXAMPLES OF SCHOOL DISTRICT/BOARD POLICIES

### 3. POLICIES ADDRESSING SCHOOL ADMISSION, ACCESS AND ATTENDANCE

#### 3.1 ADMISSION

#### **A review of admission policies reveals that homelessness or housing insecurity is not taken into consideration as a circumstance impacting students' capacity to enrol and attend school.**

School access is dependent on the student's home address/proof of residency, which is usually tied to their parent(s) or guardian(s). This information is collected once during the registration period. If a student's address changes suddenly due to homelessness, housing insecurity, or poverty, they may have to move outside their assigned school zone after the registration period. The student's new living situation may no longer meet the criteria outlined by admission and transportation policies, or the school board may simply not have the capacity to accommodate them<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, students may struggle to attend school in addition to the difficulties they are currently facing.

When a relationship with parents/guardians is unstable, unsafe, or nonexistent, youth may still be dependent on them to enroll in schools and are expected to live at their place. For instance, address change requests require parents/guardians' proof of income/ownership. Homeless youth with no permanent address or trusted parents/guardians may struggle to stay enrolled in school.

Procedural formalities relating to admission, access and attendance serve school administrations more than they help students. While they provide a framework for efficient operationalization, they inevitably discriminate against poor, housing-insecure or homeless students by assuming youth can rely on parents/guardians and access stable housing and transport.

## 2. Attendance policy examples:

*Prince Edward Island's Public School Branch's Operational Policy on Attendance and Engagement (2016) states: "The purpose of the Attendance and Engagement policy is to [...] place the primary responsibility for school attendance upon students and parents/guardians [...]"*

*The Province of Alberta Education Act (2012) states: " (31) A student, as a partner in education, has the responsibility to (a) attend school regularly and punctually, [...] (f) comply with the rules of the school and the policies of the board, [...] (h) be accountable to the student's teachers and other school staff for the student's conduct [...]"*

*The New Brunswick Education Act (1997) states: "(13(1)) [...] a parent is expected to: (a) encourage his or her child to attend to assigned homework; (b) communicate reasonably with school personnel employed at the school their child attends as required in the best interests of the child and the school community; (c) cause his or her child to attend school as required by this Act; (d) ensure the basic needs of his or her child are met, and (e) have due care for the conduct of his or her child at school and while on the way to and from school"*

## 3.2 ATTENDANCE

**Reviewed policies offer no preventive or comprehensive measures for attendance that explicitly consider poor, homeless or housing-insecure individuals. Instead, they tend to place the responsibility of attendance on students and parents/guardians.**

Additionally, punitive decisions from school boards, principals, or counsellors regarding students and their parents/guardians' compliance with attendance rules risk marginalizing them further.

Provincial/territorial Education Acts and school boards' attendance policies mandate administrative personnel at multiple levels to track attendance and punish student absences. Consequences for chronic absenteeism can go as far as fines, truancy charges and imprisonment.

When a student shows a pattern of chronic absenteeism, it is the school's responsibility to investigate, report and intervene in the form of communication with parents or guardians, warnings, punishments, or suspensions.<sup>3</sup> School boards often employ attendance officers or counsellors whose job is to investigate absenteeism and enforce attendance policies. If these measures are unsuccessful, some provincial education acts allow for court convictions. According to an [article from the Globe and Mail](#) (2016), 167 students from the Toronto District School Board were referred to court for chronic absenteeism in 2015.

In summary, the challenges faced by housing-insecure or homeless youth are being ignored in the admission and attendance policies of educational institutions. These policies not only fail to safeguard vulnerable youth but also jeopardize their access to education and further penalize them for failing to comply with inflexible administrative formalities.

### 3. Provincial policy examples:

*The Education Act in Saskatchewan (1995) states: "(154 (2)): A principal may suspend a pupil for a period not exceeding 10 school days where the principal receives information alleging, and is satisfied, that the pupil has: [...] (c) been irregular in attendance at school; (d) habitually neglected his or her duties; [...]"*

*The Education Act in Yukon (2002) states: "(27 (1)): If a child is required to attend school pursuant to this Act and the child's parent neglects or refuses to take reasonable steps to cause the child to attend school, the parent is guilty of an offence and is liable to a fine of not more than \$100 and each day's continuance of the failure or neglect shall constitute a separate offence"*

*The Education Act in Ontario (1990) states: "(30(5)): A person who is required by law to attend school and who refuses to attend or who is habitually absent from school is, unless the person is 16 years old or older, guilty of an offence and on conviction is liable to the penalties under Part VI of the Provincial Offences Act [...]"*

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through this review of Canadian provincial/territorial and school board policies, we have found that some initial steps have been taken across the country to address the issue of youth homelessness in schools. However, most of the policy action comes from policies that address youth homelessness indirectly. The existing policy actions currently in place can serve as a starting point for more substantial policy agenda-setting and policymaking efforts in the future.

We propose a twofold policy agenda strategy that focuses on developing policies deliberately and explicitly aimed at preventing and mitigating youth homelessness through the school systems. Additionally, we recommend analyzing and expanding policies that address related issues of youth homelessness. Our proposed recommendations aim to build upon prior policy initiatives and address structural and systemic gaps in the policies.

1. Identify how school district-specific priorities currently address youth homelessness, followed by consultations between jurisdictional policymakers, school board members, educators and social workers employed by school boards, researchers, and policy analysts to inform and articulate a policy agenda reflective of district priorities.
2. Begin consultations between researchers, faculties of education, and school boards to explore initiatives to address youth homelessness through school programs.
3. Identify and support collaborative projects for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness and related issues, including destigmatizing youth homelessness and increasing access to support.
4. Identify and create professional learning opportunities for pre- and in-service teachers to learn about the problem of youth homelessness and how it can be addressed in schools.
5. Partner with current service providers of programs addressing youth homelessness to leverage the dissemination of findings to policymakers and school districts.

## ABOUT

This policy brief comes out of the [Working Upstream Project](#), a collaborative research effort between multiple Canadian organizations aiming to end youth homelessness and researchers at Carleton University. Youth with lived experience of homelessness, universities, and non-profit organizations across Canada joined efforts to identify and develop effective practices for school-based prevention of youth homelessness. To learn more about the project, reach out to Mélina Poulin (Research Assistant) at [melinapoulin@cmail.carleton.ca](mailto:melinapoulin@cmail.carleton.ca) or Dr. Jacqueline Kennelly (Principal Investigator) at [jacqueline\\_kennelly@carleton.ca](mailto:jacqueline_kennelly@carleton.ca)

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