



EXECUTIVE REPORT

Responding to Youth Homelessness during COVID-19 and Beyond



Perspectives from the Youth-Serving Sector in Canada

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Acknowledgements

First, we would like to express our gratitude to the youth-serving sector frontline and management staff, who in addition to their critical daily work of supporting young people and families in their communities, took the time to so thoughtfully respond to our survey and share their stories with us.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding the youth-serving sector's need for early-stage, applied research and evidence on the impacts of COVID-19, A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness conducted an initial survey in March/April 2020 to identify the emergent trends, opportunities and challenges across Canada, as well as the ways we could support the sector throughout the pandemic. The resulting report, [Summary Report: Youth Homelessness & COVID-19 - How the Youth-Serving Sector is Coping with the Crisis](#), was published on April 28, 2020.

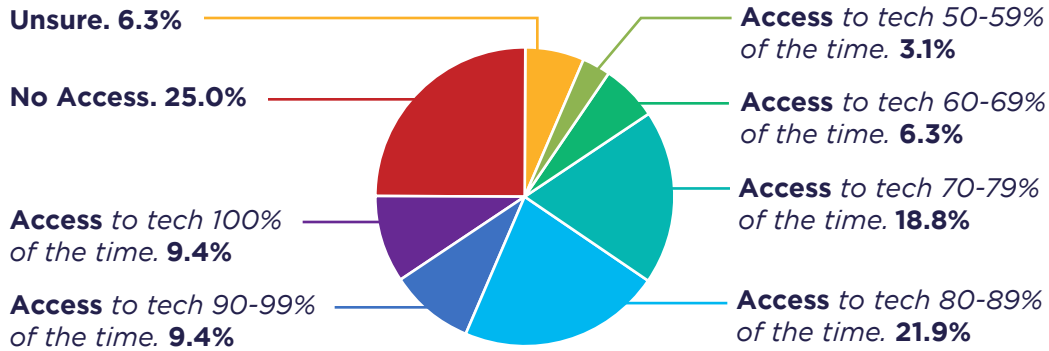
In our follow-up survey of youth-serving agencies in Canada, we dive deeper into the impacts and nuances of the COVID-19 pandemic on both young people and the sector itself. 63 people from 48 direct service and advocacy organizations across 32 communities and 7 provinces/territories completed our follow-up survey in May/June 2020. While the full breadth and depth of the impacts of the pandemic are still being explored and needs and responses continue to evolve, the insights of this report can help inform further research, practice and policy developments during the crisis and beyond.

How COVID-19 is Affecting Young People Served by the Sector

| Side Effects of the COVID-19 Response

Youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness face inequitable 'side effects' from the public health prescription and policy responses to COVID-19. As the services and spaces young people relied on for support made changes or shut down altogether, continued access and engagement with support became a challenge. In particular, while the shift to online and phone-based services may have increased engagement with mental health and other supports for some young people, concerns continue to be raised about unequal access to technology and the internet. The assumption that every young person has a cell phone and safe space to connect to supports does not hold true for all youth that are most marginalized.

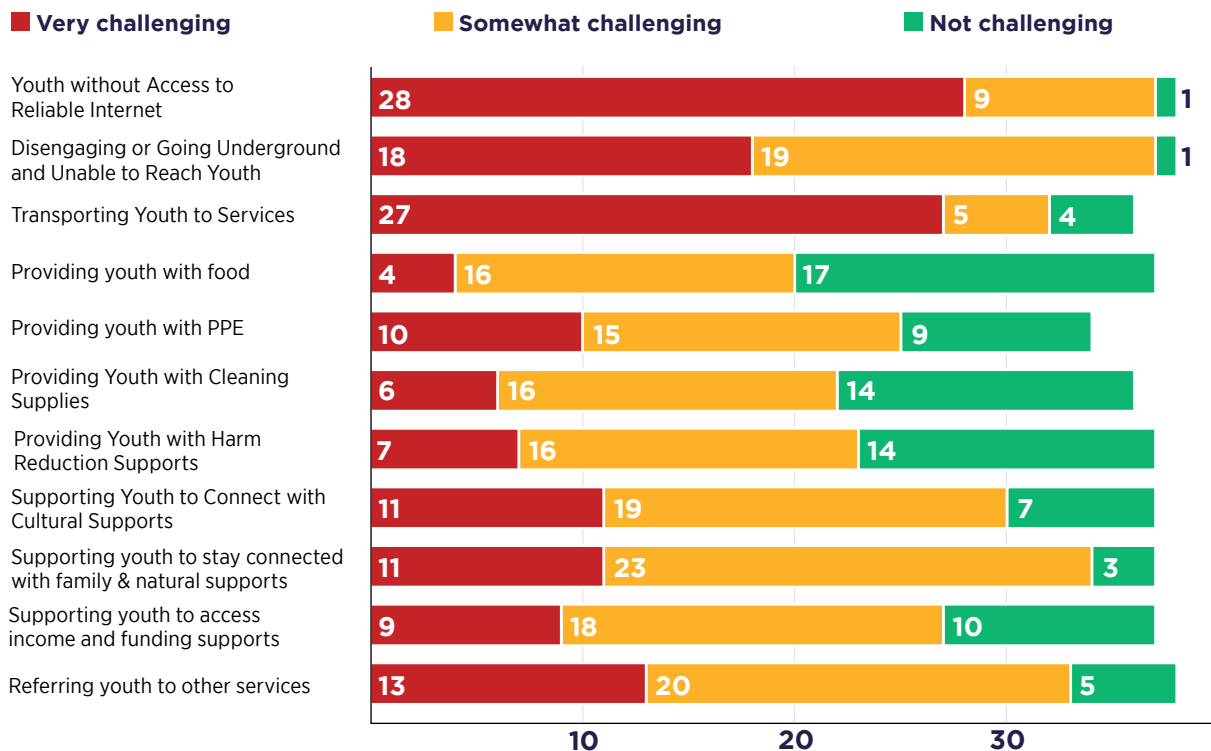
Do youth have access to technology and if so, what percentage?



Supporting Young People during the Pandemic

The sector has faced challenges helping youth to access and get what they need out of the supports available during the pandemic. It is important to note that more than half of all respondents said each of the services in the chart below were somewhat-to-very challenging to provide during COVID-19. The pandemic has impacted everything from providing basic needs, to case management, to eviction prevention and access to housing, and income supports.

Challenges Providing Outreach Support



Implications & Concerns for the Well-Being of Young People

The pandemic has heightened concerns in the sector about the impact on youth safety and socioemotional well-being. Many youth have experienced social isolation as a result of disconnection from family and natural supports, services and community. Respondents reported that in response to the pandemic and public health measures, some youth were feeling anxious, stressed, lonely and/or bored. Potential declines in socioemotional well-being and the lack of connection and face-to-face support can have significant implications for the mental health of and substance use by young people and 61% of respondents noticed increases in substance use during COVID-19. Responses to the survey and conversations with practitioners highlight the need for more thoughtful and nuanced approaches to supporting youth with complex needs during the pandemic.

It may yet be too early to know the full extent of the impacts of COVID-19 on the safety and living arrangements of young people, but based on what youth sector respondents have observed in the field there is great cause for concern:

64% noticed increases in youth staying in unsafe living arrangements

54% noticed increases in youth experiencing interpersonal conflict at home

43% noticed increases in youth experiencing domestic violence

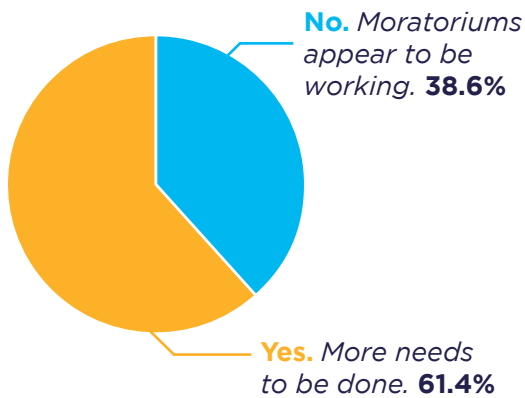
The response to COVID-19 has been inequitable to youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness writ large, however greater inequities are experienced by racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, Indigenous, youth with disabilities, newcomers and other further marginalized and oppressed youth. It is important to note that the challenges we are seeing for oppressed and otherwise marginalized youth are not new, but amplified. The responses to this report, or in some cases the lack thereof, point to a need to further explore the intersectional impacts of the pandemic with young people, service providers and advocates in research, practice and policy development.

“These groups of people are marginalized during the best of times so the pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on them.”

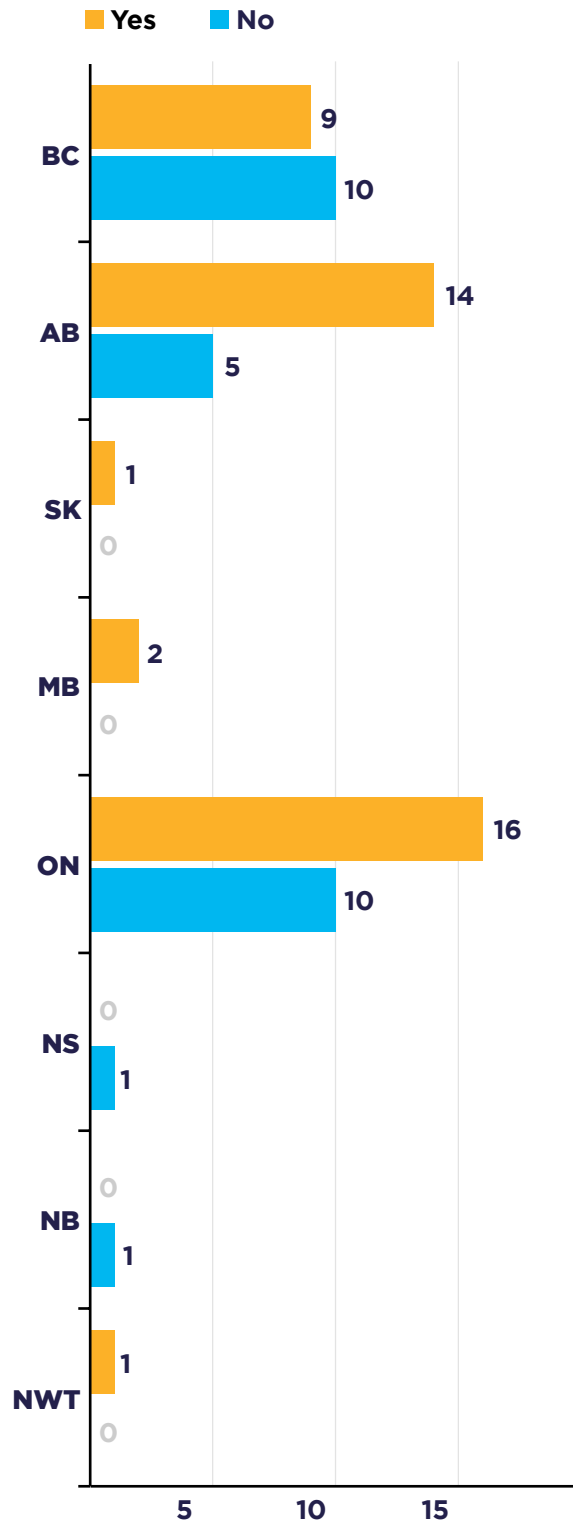
Moratoria on Exits from Care

The existing moratoria on exits from care in various (though not all) provinces and territories has been a largely positive step during the pandemic. However, advocates and the survey participants know that more can and should be done to support young people as they transition out of care beyond the pandemic. Organizations, including the Child Welfare League of Canada, are [urging provincial and territorial governments not to lift moratoria on exits from care](#) until adequate youth-centred transition policies are in place.

Have you experienced disruptions of services and supports for youth in or from care?



Have you experienced disruptions of services and supports for youth in or from care?



How the Youth-Serving Sector Continues to Cope with the Crisis



Inflows from Other Systems, Institutions & Communities

Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents noted discharge/exits from institutions (hospitals, corrections, university residences) or breakdowns in children's aid placements. An additional third (33%) of organizations have noticed sudden increases in young people and families migrating from other communities. Roughly half (18%) of those organizations noted inflows from urban areas, while the other half (15%) had inflows from rural and remote communities.

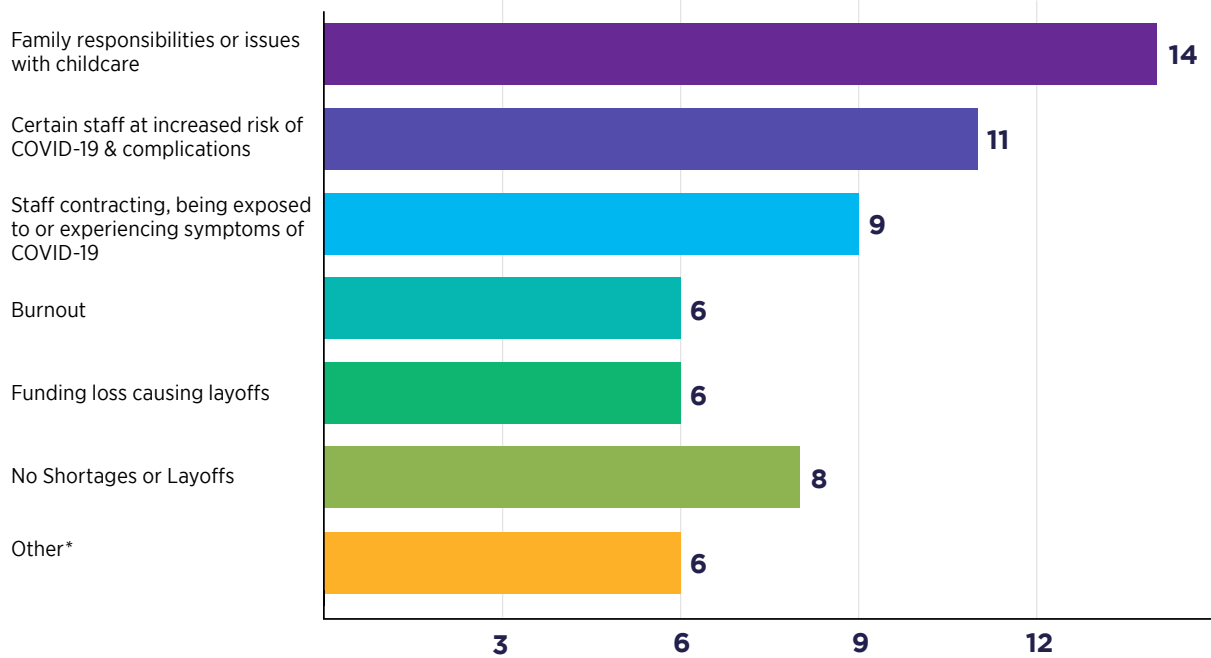
Staffing & Wellness

Family responsibilities and challenges finding adequate childcare arrangements were cited by almost half (45%) of respondents as the reason for staff shortages. Staff with increased risk of complications, and those that had been exposed to, contracted or experienced symptoms of COVID-19 were cited as reasons for staff shortages by 35% and 29% of respondents respectively. An additional 19% of respondents noted that funding loss had resulted in layoffs, while others were struggling to maintain staff levels to keep up with ongoing or increased demand for services.

Staff burnout and compassion fatigue have been of increased concern and attention, though they are not new phenomena in the youth-serving sector and other helping professions. Almost a fifth (19%) of respondents stated that burnout contributed to staff shortages.

Organizations identified a range of ways that they were trying to support the wellness of staff, in the forms of motivation, validation and solidarity, increased flexibility, and access to professional support.

Reasons for Staff Shortages/Layoffs (n=34)



* (Increased demand for services leading to staff shortage; Ongoing/new recruitment challenges; Provincial restrictions on working across multiple sites; Student placements fell through)

Funds & Fundraising Ability

A third (33%) of respondents stated that their organization was able to access federal top-up funds through their local Reaching Home emergency fund. Of those that did not receive federal funding, the reasons varied from:

- *Not needing a top-up or finding alternative funding streams or resources, including provincial funds (ex. Grocery cards; Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy; Employer Health Tax; Social Service Relief Funds) (7 respondents)*
- *Not eligible for Reaching Home funding top-ups (4 respondents)*
- *In the process of applying or waiting for the results (3 respondents)*
- *Lack of focus on youth in the local distribution of Reaching Home funds (2 respondents)*

Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) also indicated that their organizations were able to access provincial/territorial emergency funds from departments or ministries responsible for housing and homelessness, public health, children's services, and in one case the Office of the Attorney General.

While funding seemed relatively stable and some did not require top-ups at the time of the survey (May-June 2020), as noted in the first summary report, there are concerns about needs in the future if the pandemic interrupts upcoming fundraising events and initiatives.

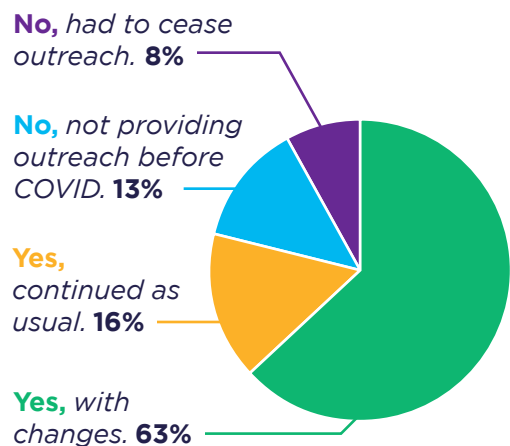
Adaptations during COVID-19

A full 79% of respondents stated that their organizations' outreach services have continued during the pandemic, though 80% of those providing outreach said changes had to be made. Three (3) organizations stated they had to completely cease outreach services during COVID-19, citing that the risks from COVID-19 prevented them from continuing and coordinating with others or that the spaces they were using to provide drop-in for meals and support had too many people gathering to continue safely.

Respondents described how their outreach services changed in the following ways:

- *Having staff work remotely and use technology to stay in touch with young people (ex. phone, text, Zoom, Facebook Messenger, etc.);*
- *Allowing youth living onsite to access food in the facility and delivering to youth offsite;*
- *Focusing on short-term goals and plans in family mediation for the duration of the pandemic;*
- *Doing more outreach outside of agency offices;*
- *Creating staff bubbles in the event that a staff member tests positive for COVID-19; and*
- *New procedures for (re-)entering housing programs to decrease risk of infection.*

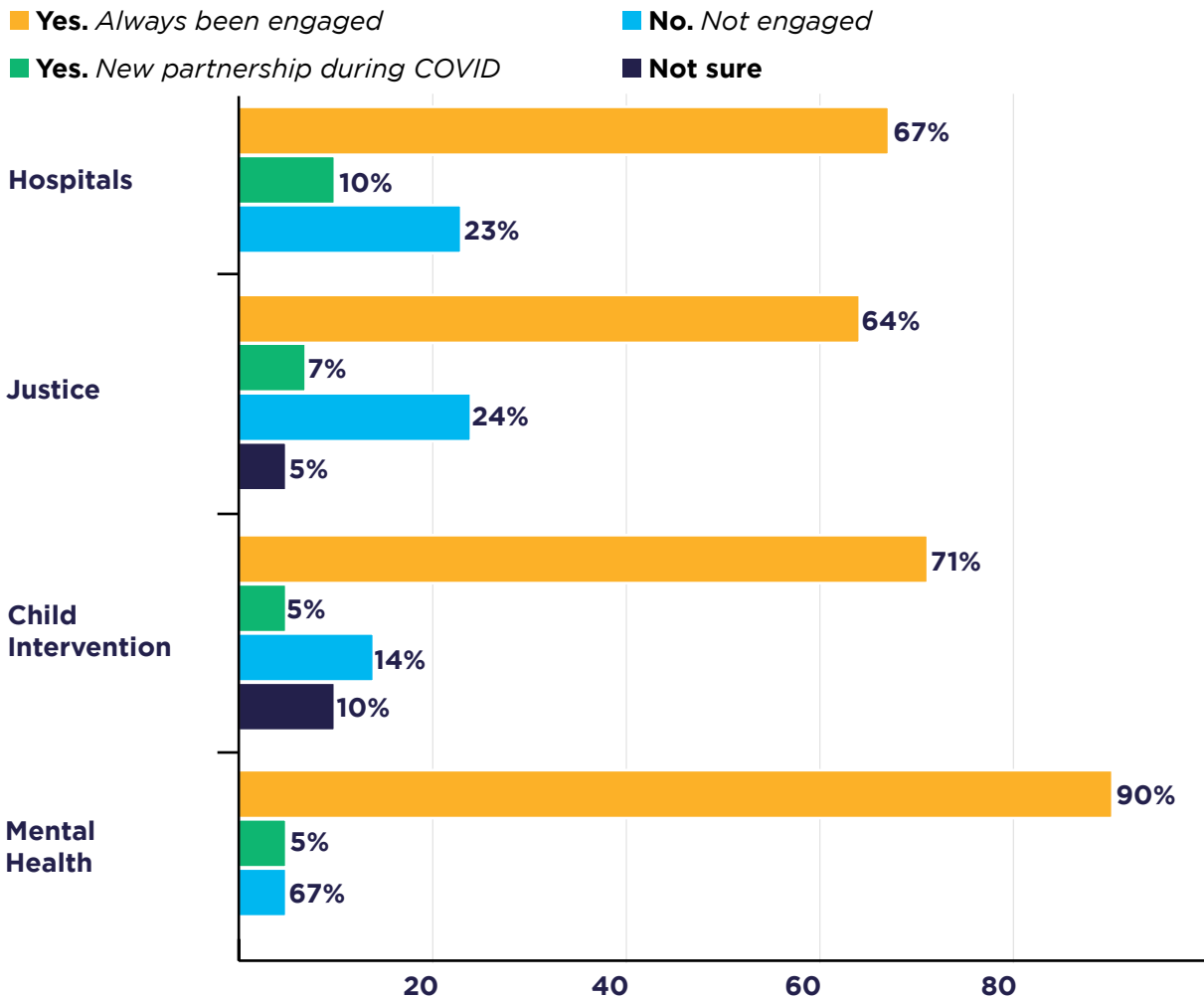
Providing Outreach Services During COVID-19 (n=38)



Connections with various systems outside the homeless sector have increased during the pandemic. When asked which systems, organizations were working with during the COVID-19 pandemic, 95% had connections with local mental health services, and 76% were working with child intervention services, an improvement

of 5% each since the pandemic hit. The youth sector engaged with justice and hospitals the least pre-COVID-19 (64% and 67% respectively), but these systems saw the most new engagement during the pandemic. This is likely because of the increased collaboration required with hospitals to manage the spread of infection and compliance with public health measures, and the discharge of people from correctional facilities to minimize/manage outbreaks.

Working with Systems During COVID-19



Beyond communities continuing to share food, space and other resources with youth-serving agencies in the form of mutual aid, respondents observed a growing awareness of homelessness as an issue that impacts everyone and the importance of civil society. This pandemic has shone a bright light on the value that civil society brings to communities. There is a critical amount of important work being conducted and services provided beyond government and the private sector that requires greater profiling, respect and sustainability.

| Desire for Action from the Sector

Any future actions to understand and address the ongoing pandemic and the way forward must be grounded in the following approaches:

- *Rights-Based*
- *Human-Centred Design* (including People with Lived/Living Experience of Youth Homelessness and Practitioners)
- *Intersectionality, Equity & Decolonization*
- *Trauma-Informed*
- *Harm-Reduction*
- *Positive Youth Development Orientation*

With these approaches in mind, and given the challenges and needs expressed by the youth-serving sector, the following are ongoing action areas that require renewed and continued focus:

ACTION AREA #1

Impact & Equity Review

Examining the impacts and effectiveness of policy and practice responses and adaptations to identify ways to be equitable and youth-centred.

In Response to...

- Known inequities of COVID-19, public policy responses and service adaptations (ex. Access to technology, reliable internet, and transportation)
- Unknown inequities of COVID-19, public policy responses and service adaptations (ex. For BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+, newcomer, rural and remote youth)
- Lack of nuanced, youth-centred responses to COVID-19, especially for youth with complex needs

Ways We're Taking Action: Shortly after the pandemic began in Canada, [Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab](#) (Making the Shift Inc.) released a call for research proposals to provide \$200,000 in grants of up to \$40,000 to researchers in Canada to conduct research specific to COVID-19 and youth homelessness prevention and sustained exits.

The results of the successful applicants' projects will contribute to the evidence base on how COVID-19 has impacted marginalized young people in Canada. A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness will also be conducting a survey with youth with lived experience of homelessness as a follow-up to the 2019 Without A Home survey that will look at changes youth may have experienced because of the pandemic.

ACTION AREA #2

Systems & Policy Change

Ensuring youth-specific, prevention-oriented systems planning, service integration and resource allocation to address the disconnects between systems and sectors that can cause and increase the risk of youth homelessness during the pandemic and beyond.

In Response to...

- Lack of prioritization of and dedicated responses and resources for young people during the pandemic
- Lack of coordination and communication across and between systems causing service disruptions and inconsistency
- Poor transitions out of programs, institutions and systems due to inadequate and inappropriate policies and planning

Ways We're Taking Action: A Way Home Canada (AWHC) and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) have put advocacy and collaborative efforts into high gear during the pandemic. These sector surveys and the COVID-19 Community of Practice calls have helped direct our efforts as needs and priorities have emerged during COVID-19.

Collaboration with organizations, like the Child Welfare League of Canada on moratoria on exits from care, have been critical for ensuring alignment and unification in calls to action for pandemic response and recovery. The Systems Planning Collective (a partnership between AWHC, the COH and HelpSeeker) has also taken time to reconfigure and develop exciting new opportunities to advance systems change in communities across Canada - stay tuned!

ACTION AREA #3

Youth-Centred Interventions

Developing and investing in a range of housing options and youth-centred interventions that prevent and sustain exits from homelessness and promote wholistic positive outcomes and wellbeing (ex. [Connection to community and culture](#); [Access to income, education and employment](#); [Mental and physical health](#)).

In Response to...

- Lack of programs and services to keep youth and families out of homelessness during a pandemic that puts more people at risk of eviction and housing loss
- Need for intersectional, youth-centred housing and supports, particularly for youth with complex needs and planning

Ways We're Taking Action: A Way Home Canada, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and Making the Shift Inc. are committed to building the evidence base for and advancing interventions that span the continuum of preventing and sustainably ending youth homelessness (See [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#)).

The [Making the Shift Demonstration Labs](#) and emergent Making the Shift Inc. funded research projects support the development of resources and training and technical assistance for mobilizing knowledge to practitioners, policymakers, and beyond. Take a look at the recently released [Youth Reconnect Program Guide](#) and [THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide](#) for examples of how we are sharing our learnings about effective interventions with the youth-serving sector.

ACTION AREA #4

Support for the Sector

Supporting the youth-serving sector through sustainable funding that will allow organizations to offer flexible work arrangements, provide continued learning and development opportunities, and promote staff wellness (ex. Robust employment benefits; Liveable salaries/wages; Vacation time).

In Response to...

- Lack of sustainable and flexible funding to maintain staff complements, programs and promote staff development
- Concerns for future fundraising ability during COVID-19
- Increased burnout and compassion fatigue with the demands and trauma experienced on the job, during and before the pandemic
- Family responsibilities, exposure to COVID-19 and risk of complications from COVID-19 impacting staffing

Ways We're Taking Action: AWHC, the COH and Making the Shift Inc. have the privilege of connecting with an amazing network of youth serving agencies through platforms like this survey and the COVID-19 Community of Practice calls. The dedication of the sector makes reports like these possible and gives valuable insight into the realities of working in the sector.

Our Making the Shift Demonstration Lab community partners, the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness, and the broader network of service providers across Canada have long shared about how their work could be improved and the supports that staff and the sector require to be able to support young people to the degree that is needed. The vision for making the shift toward preventing youth homelessness has always included reimagining how we resource and support the youth-serving sector and will continue to be a part of our advocacy and focus of our research.

In July 2020, [A Way Home Canada submitted a brief to the House of Commons' Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities](#), which highlighted the need for reimagining the ways in which we support the youth-serving sector.