



SUMMARY REPORT

Responding to Youth Homelessness during COVID-19 and Beyond

Perspectives from the Youth-Serving Sector in Canada

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homelessness



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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.

We would also like to thank David French and our teams at A Way Home Canada, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, and Making the Shift Inc. for providing insight, support and assistance in the production and design of this report.

How to cite this report

Buchnea, A. & McKitterick, M. (2020). *Responding to youth homelessness during COVID-19 and beyond: Perspectives from the youth-serving sector in Canada*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press and A Way Home Canada.

ISBN: 9781550146769

Layout & Design by: Sarah Anne Charlebois, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (Hub Solutions).



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! FROM THE FRONTLINES: ■ Living at the Margins During COVID-19

Julie Gorman, *Executive Director of Sudbury Action Centre for Youth in Sudbury, Ontario*

As an organization that works with some of the most vulnerable populations, we have been overwhelmed by the amount of collaborative services being provided to meet the immediate needs of homeless people during the COVID-19 crisis.

While most places were closing their doors to the public (for compliance and safety reasons), a few homeless-serving organizations with full support from the City of Greater Sudbury, came together to assess our community needs, create solutions, and communicate the changes to not only our clients, but community partners as well.

When there was an increased need for food and social distancing, the formerly closed arena became the new site for the soup kitchen. When people needed somewhere to access washroom facilities, the local YMCA opened their doors. When it was over 35 degrees celsius, outreach teams, like SACY's Harm Reduction and Community Support teams, were out in groups providing water and other essential supplies.

Though there are always going to be new issues that arise, the homeless populations and those who are street-entrenched have been having their needs assessed and subsequently met, as much as possible, throughout this crisis. Everyone, including everyday citizens are thinking about those who have nothing during this pandemic; it is exactly the kind of heartwarming story you would want to provide about your community. This does not, however, mean that everyone is doing well during the crisis. The new priority population during COVID are those living just above homelessness. The low-income individuals and families who relied upon free wireless internet access, free telephones, food banks, subsidized child care, air-conditioned malls, libraries and drop-in centres, and other community resources, are now a hidden population, and they are in need.

With many organizations closing their doors and moving their services onto a digital platform, the seniors isolating in their apartments without internet face new barriers to the access of services. For a single parent of a small child, trips on the two buses to the food bank has decreased travel safety for both themselves and their child, but food security is a real concern within the home. 2SLGBTQ+ youth living in unsupportive homes have no safe place where they can go to reach out for support, even if they are using their computers or phones. We know of two people who just moved into their new apartments after spending months working on their mental

health in an on-site facility. Neither have access to a telephone or internet, and since COVID, neither of them have had the capacity to connect to their doctors for appointments, or call the crisis line when they are in crisis.

The COVID emergency has shined a light on this new gap in services among low-income people, people who are living in unsupportive (or abusive) homes, and people who do not have access to technology. This need has not gone unnoticed by the community, and organizations are working both separately and collaboratively to determine how best to address these issues. How can we support single parents who need respite? How do we provide not only access to technology, but training on how to use the technology and a sustainable source of internet to low income people in our community? How do we create a safe space for a person to reach out when they are under tight supervision by unsupportive people within their home? These are the new questions that we are asking ourselves since the emergence COVID.

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to imagine that anyone has been spared from the reaches of COVID-19 and its impacts on people's daily lives and short- and long-term plans; however, growing evidence points to the disproportionate negative effects of the pandemic and policy responses on marginalized and oppressed individuals and groups.¹ While some of these negative effects are unique to COVID-19, the pandemic has largely amplified existing inequities and stress-tested our systems' abilities to respond to massive disruption. The gaps and weaknesses in our social safety net have been laid bare when we see the impacts of the pandemic on young people at-risk of or experiencing homelessness and the youth-serving sector itself.

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. Respondents to this survey indicated a desire to stay connected to the broader network of service providers across Canada in order to share and receive information and discuss emerging challenges. As a result, A Way Home Canada has hosted weekly national COVID-19 Community of Practice calls for youth-serving agencies, which are still ongoing. The second survey ran from the end of April until the beginning of June, seeking to dig deeper into the questions and insights from the first survey and the COVID-19 Community of Practice calls.

¹ Bouka, A.A., & Bouka, Y. (19 May 2020). Canada's COVID-19 blind spots on race, immigration and labour. Policy Options. Retrieved from <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/may-2020/canadas-covid-19-blind-spots-on-race-immigration-and-labour/>

The Report at a Glance



The first of three sections of this report explores what service providers in organizations across Canada had to say about some of the impacts COVID-19 has had on the young people they serve:

- *Inequitable 'side effects' faced by youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness because of public health and policy responses to COVID-19*
- *Challenges around helping youth to access and get what they need out of the supports available during the pandemic*
- *Implications and concerns the sector has about the pandemic's impact on youth safety and wellbeing*
- *Impacts of provincial/territorial moratoria on exits from care and areas for improvement*

The second section highlights ways that the youth-serving sector has been impacted by and coped with the crisis:

- *Managing increased flows of youth from other systems, institutions and communities into the youth homelessness system*
- *New and heightened concerns about staff wellness throughout the pandemic*
- *Current and future concerns about funding and fundraising ability*
- *Adaptations to services and approaches, including the use of different engagement methods, creation of new protocols, and collaboration across systems and civil society*

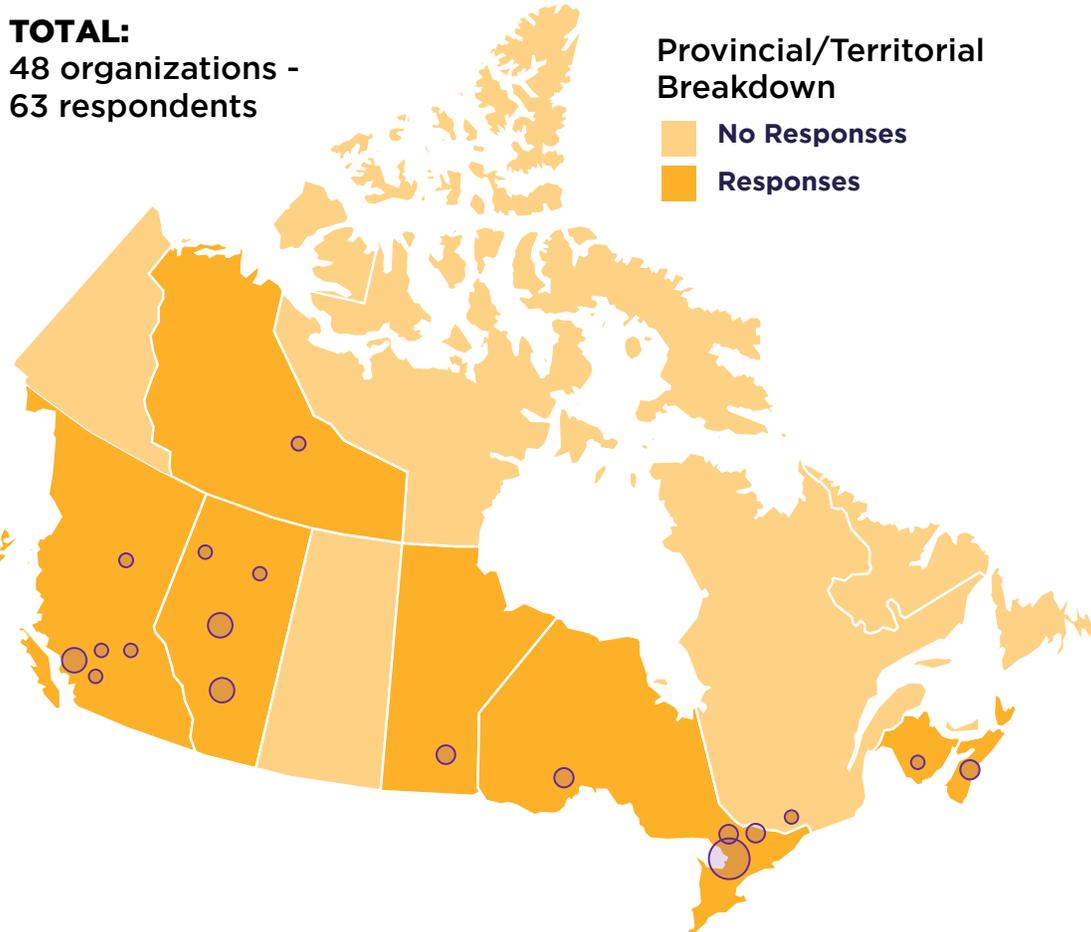
In the final section, we identify essential action areas for better responding to crises like COVID-19 and chart a way forward into recovery and rebuilding, including:

- *Examining the impacts and effectiveness of policy and practice responses and adaptations to identify ways to be more equitable and youth-centred*
- *Addressing the lack of prioritization of young people and the disconnects between systems and sectors that can cause and increase the risk of youth homelessness*
- *Investing in interventions that prevent and sustain exits from youth homelessness*
- *Supporting the youth-serving sector through sustainable funding and a focus on staff wellness*

The full breadth and depth of the impacts of the pandemic are still being explored and needs and responses continue to evolve, but the insights of this report can help inform further research, practice and policy developments during the crisis and beyond.

Youth Sector Participants

A total of 63 people from 48 different organizations in 32 communities and 7 provinces/territories across Canada participated in the survey, ranging from frontline staff to management to executive leadership. Twenty-one (21) organizations serve some combination of urban, rural & remote areas, 20 serve exclusively urban areas, and 7 serve exclusively rural areas.



Initially, we had released one longform survey, but based on feedback, roughly halfway through data collection the survey was split into two to address attrition: one for management/leadership and one for frontline. This created an average of about 40 participants per question.

Limitations of the Survey & Report



As with any survey there are limitations to the data and findings. Many communities, organizations and researchers have research projects underway that we hope will create a more fulsome picture of the variance and nuance of young people and the youth-serving sector's experiences during COVID-19.

The sample size was not large enough to make sweeping or definitive claims at the provincial/territorial level, however the experiences captured and recommendations outlined in this report are backed up by other studies and grey literature, such as news articles.

This survey was targeted at people working in the youth-serving sector. A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness have created other avenues for young people to share their experiences, including through funding research with the Making the Shift Youth Homeless Social Innovation Lab specific to Covid-19, with the MtS Demonstration Lab, and youth that have been involved in previous studies. While some respondents spoke to challenges faced by Indigenous, newcomer and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, the survey does not capture the full range of intersectional experiences of young people, such as Black, rural/remote, parenting and differently abled youth.

While we present some limited data on the flows of young people from systems and institutions, more research is needed to explore possible changes in referral sources during COVID-19. The specific challenges and opportunities around education and employment should also be examined in further research. Additionally, as the pandemic wears on and services continue to adapt and change, it will be important to capture the outcomes, equity and efficacy of service adaptations, as well as the evidence that was used to inform these adaptations in the first place.

PART 1: HOW COVID-19 IS AFFECTING YOUNG PEOPLE SERVED BY THE SECTOR

Side Effects of the COVID-19 Response

It is clear that the public health response to COVID-19 was not designed to address the unique needs of youth that are unstably/precariously housed or living on the street. As discussed in the previous report, the public health response to COVID-19 is inherently inequitable and often unattainable for young people at-risk of or experiencing homelessness.²

Staying home and self-isolating when sick is more feasible for those that have a stable and safe place to live, often with higher levels of education and jobs with higher earnings.³

Social/physical distancing is more challenging for those living in congregate housing/shelter spaces.

Washing your hands frequently requires reliable access to washrooms and sanitation supplies.

2 Perri, M., Dosani, N., & Hwang, S.W. (2020). COVID-19 and people experiencing homelessness: challenges and mitigation strategies. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 192(26), E716-E719. Retrieved from <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/192/26/E716>

3 Deng, Z., D. Messacar, and R. Morissette. 2020. "Running the economy remotely: Potential for working from home during and after COVID-19." STATCAN COVID-19: Data to Insights for a Better Canada, no. 00026. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 45280001. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

The side effects of this “prescription” for mitigating COVID-19 and flattening the curve onset swiftly and have only become more complex and enmeshed over the duration of the pandemic. The accompanying social and economic policies meant to alleviate the disproportionate effects of the pandemic at the local, provincial/territorial and national levels have also not been designed with or for youth that are most marginalized. The more we hear from the frontline, the clearer the picture we have of the response to COVID-19’s impacts on young people and the youth-serving sector.

Restrictions are now easing across Canada, and young people currently make up the largest share of new cases⁴ – a change from earlier in the pandemic which disproportionately affected the elderly. New information, adaptations to advice and our evolving knowledge of COVID-19, while understandable, have made it difficult for service providers to keep youth and families informed and to help them understand the gravity of the pandemic.

“Working with youth in rural areas; you are not seeing youth practice physical distancing and not seeing a large change visually within the community and being already so disconnected the youth are having a very hard time understanding the pandemic, and recognizing the need to physical distance for safety and therefore find it very frustrating for not understanding the new protocols ... ie unable to provide transportation now to food banks.”

One of the overarching implications of Canada’s public health response to homelessness during COVID-19⁵ has been the service closures, adaptations and reductions, which have made it increasingly difficult for young people living on the street or in precarious housing to access public washrooms, drop-ins, restaurants, libraries and other spaces and supports that they had previously relied on. Referring youth to other services was rated very challenging by 35% and somewhat challenging by 53% of respondents.



4 Alam, H. (19 July 2020). Lockdown fatigue, sense of ‘invincibility’ causing more COVID-19 infections in young people, scientists say. *CBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/lockdown-fatigue-invincibility-causing-more-covid-19-infections-in-young-people-1.5655401>

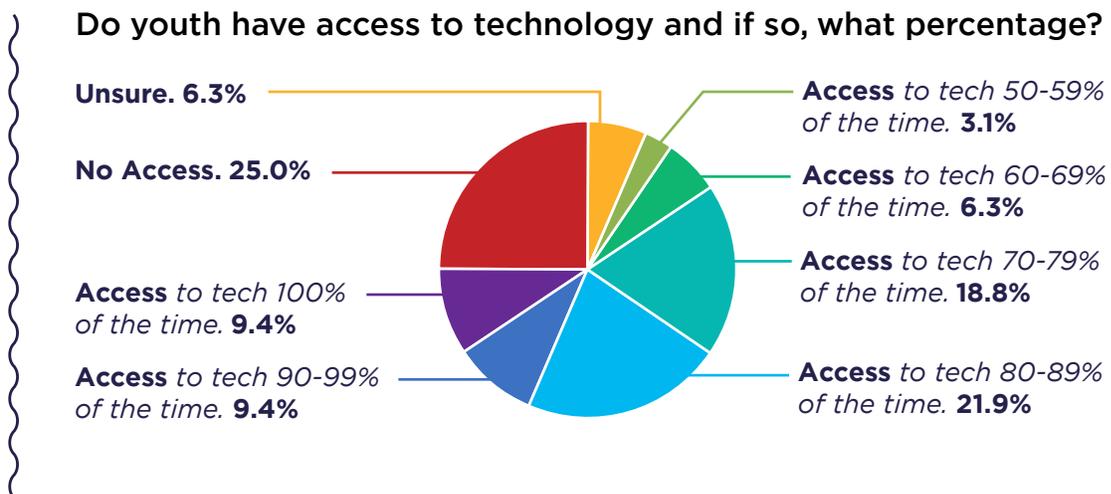
5 Government of Canada. (2020), Guidance for providers of services for people experiencing homelessness (in the context of COVID-19). Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/guidance-documents/homelessness.html>

Decreased face-to-face interaction between workers and young people also raises concerns that the challenges facing youth at home are going ‘underground’ or unnoticed. The lack of drop-in space and interactions at school, along with the increase of frontline staff working from home compound to make outreach and engagement to youth that have recently become homeless, are transient, or that were not connected to services prior to the pandemic.

Access to Technology & the Internet

In our first report, we observed new roles for technology that were emerging as both youth and service providers lost ways to connect with one another and as in-person services closed or reduced capacity. For some young people, technology was a lifeline that allowed them to continue to connect with services, their friends and family. Online platforms and technology have been used to fill the gaps, and as more service providers have begun to reopen or engage in street outreach, respondents reported that technology continued to play new roles.

However, we have also seen in this and the previous survey that inequitable access to devices and reliable internet among youth experiencing or at-risk of homelessness has been a barrier to continued access, engagement and support. In the second survey we further explored the role of online technology in supporting young people’s access to services.



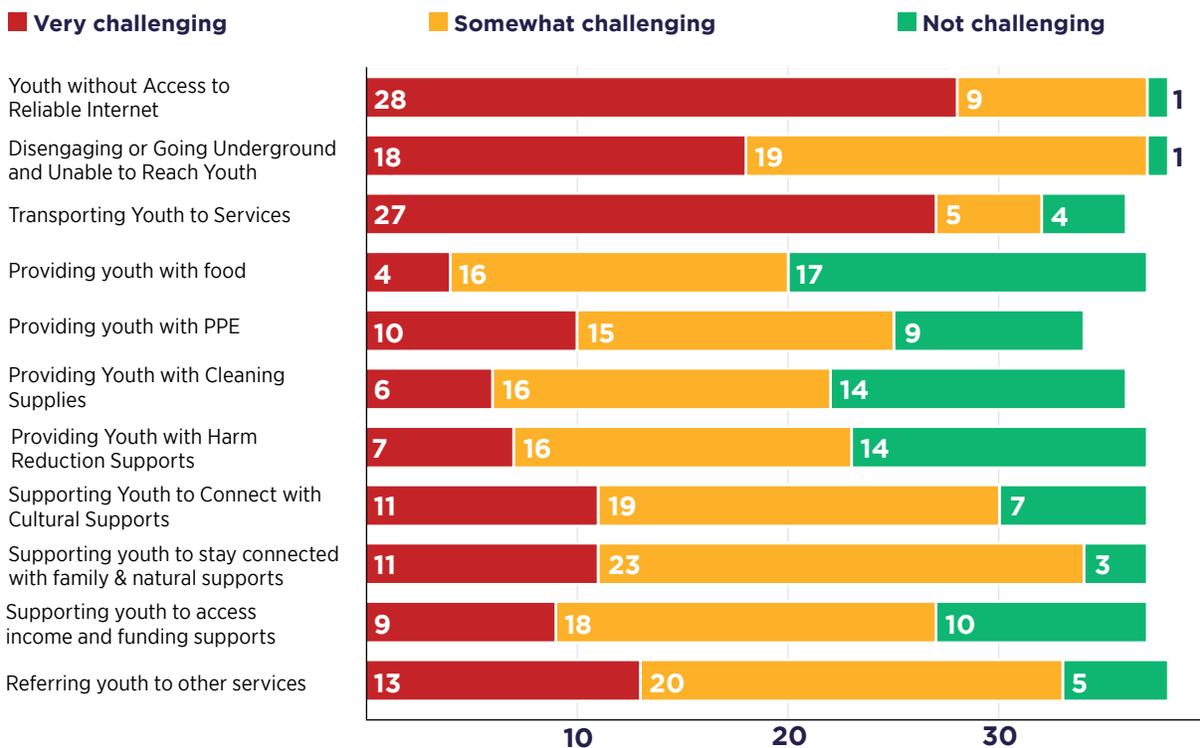
The assumption that every young person has a cell phone and safe space to connect to supports does not hold true for all youth that are most marginalized. Almost 100% of respondents rated the lack of access to reliable internet as somewhat or very challenging, (23.7% and 73.7% respectively). Two-thirds of respondents said that 50%

or more of the youth they work with had access to technology. Only one third said that technology and internet were accessible to 80% or more of youth. The reasons for lack of technology and internet varied from theft of belongings (including cell phones and laptops) to reliance on internet access in youth-serving agencies' in-person spaces. For organizations that are not equipped with webcams to use video platforms like Zoom, it was noted that youth may not be interested in connecting by phone. A promising finding was that some organizations have created partnerships with government, the private sector and community members to broaden access for young people.

Supporting Young People During the Pandemic

Despite the intersecting challenges of upholding public health guidelines and limited access to technology and the internet, the youth-serving sector has continued to support young people throughout the pandemic with varying degrees of challenges and success. The following table highlights the degree of difficulty respondents have had supporting young people across a number of outreach services they provide:

Challenges Providing Outreach Support



It is important to note that more than half of all respondents said each of the above services were somewhat-to-very challenging to provide during COVID-19. **This section of the report delves deeper into the specific challenges associated with supporting young people in the following areas:**

- *Access to Basic Needs & Services;*
- *Case Management & Connection to Family, Community & Culture;*
- *Evictions, Housing Placements & Isolation Space, and;*
- *Income Supports*

| Access to Basic Needs & Services

Service disruptions, closures and changes have impacted whether and how young people access basic needs and services in their communities. A significant issue with physical distancing requirements has been that it prohibits many service providers and frontline workers from offering to drive youth to where they need to go.

Providing transportation to youth that need to get to services, appointments, and apartment viewings was rated very challenging by 75% of respondents, and an additional 14% said it was somewhat challenging.

Providing transportation to youth that need to get to services, appointments, and apartment viewings was rated very challenging by 75% of respondents, and an additional 14% said it was somewhat challenging.

One respondent stated that they have had to make arrangements for youth to meet them at apartment viewings and move-ins. In rural areas where transportation options were already limited, getting young people to the resources they need has become more difficult and frustrating for young people.

Providing youth with food was rated the least challenging for most respondents, which may be related to mutual aid and community food programs that have emerged during the crisis to meet these essential needs.

Additionally, emergency funding has largely been targeted at ensuring community members' basic needs are met during the pandemic.

Respondents expressed challenges providing youth with PPE (30% very challenging; 45% somewhat challenging), cleaning supplies (17% very challenging; 44% somewhat challenging) and harm reduction supplies (19% very challenging; 43% somewhat challenging). These supplies are critical for supporting the safety and wellbeing of

young people living independently, especially with less in-person interaction with workers and the concerns of a surge in the opioid epidemic coinciding with COVID-19 (see more under '[Substance Use](#)').

Case Management & Connection to Family & Culture

97% of respondents rated youth disengaging or going underground and being unable to reach them very or somewhat challenging (47% and 50%, respectively)

92% of respondents rated supporting youth to stay connected with family and natural supports very or somewhat challenging (30% and 62%, respectively)

81% of respondents rated connecting to cultural supports very or somewhat challenging (30% and 51%, respectively)

Case management and doing family mediation work continue to be essential supports for young people and families to cope with the uncertainty of COVID-19. Youth are having to navigate living independently or staying with family that may be experiencing increased stress, anxiety and conflict during the pandemic. However, these services have been impacted by the lack of face-to-face interaction with youth and their families. It is harder to stay connected as staff work from home and try to check in with youth using alternatives like video chats and social media. As a recurrent theme, unequal access to technology and the internet complicate things further.

The actual work of family mediation may be impeded when done remotely, because it does not always allow for the deep interpersonal and dynamic work that is involved in mediation and setting families up for long-term success. One respondent noted that they have had to focus on short-term goal-setting with families for the duration of the pandemic.

Staying connected to community and culture is limited by public health requirements. Places of worship, cultural centres and other community spaces closed, and community and cultural events, including pow wows, round dances, Pride, Ramadan and Easter, have looked drastically different this year and for the foreseeable future. This particularly impacts on Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+ and newcomer youth that may feel especially disconnected from their communities and/or cultural/religious practices that are important parts of their personal identities.

FROM THE FRONTLINES: **Family & Natural Supports Work During the Pandemic**

Heidi Griffin, *Haven's Way Support Coach at Safe Haven Foundation in Calgary, Alberta*

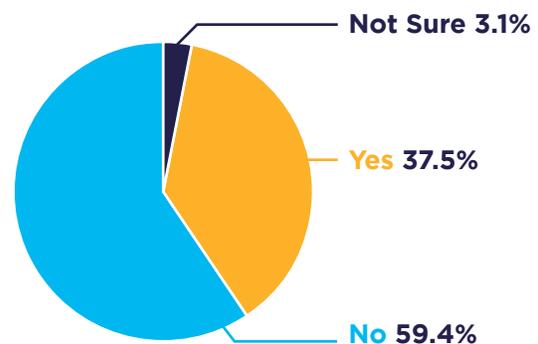
During the last few months, as the world has been faced with adjusting to the “new-normal” of COVID-19 changes, we have found at the Safe Haven Foundation, that relationships with family and natural supports have grown even stronger! With the use of technology and social distance meetups, the girls have been able to engage in intentional healthy connections with their supports.

As a Support Coach for the program, it is important for me to maintain connections with family and natural supports when the girls give permission for me to do so. I was able to have a meaningful “parking lot” meeting using lawn chairs outside of a Tim Horton’s last month with the mother of a youth in our program. This mother was recently let go from her job due to COVID-19. During the meet-up, we had a meaningful discussion about the challenges that she has turned into opportunities. She opened up about unhappiness in her job, and that she will be using this season of being laid off to search for a job that is more meaningful for her. I was able to offer her suggestions of organizations within Calgary that match her passions and talents. Now her and her daughter are both job seeking, and can relate even further on the highs and lows that come with finding new employment! Additionally, this mother shared that it has been meaningful for her to connect with her daughter at our program through backyard “tailgate” parties and social distanced meet-ups. It’s evident that during these unique times, they’ve found ways to make their relationship even stronger.

Evictions, Housing Placements & Isolation Space

Each province/territory and community is at a different stage of reopening and it is yet unclear when and how evictions proceedings will move forward in the coming months. **A striking finding in our first survey data was that one-third (33%) of respondents noted ‘eviction prevention’ as one of their top challenges for keeping youth stably housed** during the pandemic. This is despite provincial actions to (a) suspend evictions of tenants unable to pay rent due to COVID-19; (b) suspend evictions hearings, (c) not issue new eviction notices and postpone scheduled evictions, and/or (d) only process urgent evictions. This indicates that some landlords or property managers are still attempting to evict tenants during the crisis while alternative housing options are limited and the ability to conduct housing searches is impeded. It is also important to note that in some cases, youth might be getting ‘evicted’ without formal eviction proceedings if their housing arrangements are informal (ex. Staying with a partner or couchsurfing), or if they are unaware of the formal procedures for eviction. It will be critical to monitor the impacts on young people in provinces like Ontario as evictions proceedings resume, despite continued barriers to accessing employment and income.

Able to use alternative spaces to house young people during the pandemic?



In the immediate response to the pandemic, the responses to this and the previous survey indicated that in some communities, isolation space for youth was not always considered or prioritized. **About 38% of respondents stated that they have used alternative housing options during COVID-19, relying on a combination of mutual aid and relationships with the private market and public systems, including:**

- *Temporary motel until housing secured in room & board situation (Some youth requested hotel rooms because of preexisting conditions and anxiety about COVID)*
- *Isolation centres (not long-term) - some through partnerships with provincial departments like Children’s Services, or other agencies*
- *Making shelters a 24hr operation for youth to shelter in place with greater concentration on housing rather than shelter*
- *Scattered site market housing*
- *University/college campus residences*

In Edmonton, for example, a unique partnership has emerged between the organization, Youth Empowerment & Support Services and the local university to provide overflow space in one of their residences as students are not on campus. As universities, colleges and hotels/motels begin bringing people back into their spaces, there are questions about what comes next for young people that were temporarily housed there.

Significantly, however, 50% respondents thought that the short-term housing solutions could evolve into longer term housing opportunities that could be built into their current housing continuum during recovery. Purchasing and renovating hotels/motels was mentioned as one of these alternatives with potential to become a long-term housing arrangement. Increased post-pandemic government funding was cited as part of the solution.

“Due to the schools being closed we have been able to take advantage of the empty student housing.”

There were also efforts by respondents to start increasing their long-term housing options now by leveraging the new relationships with landlords that typically provide student housing. Having met local landlord needs by filling empty student housing with youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, they are now in a better position to advocate for housing post-pandemic.

| Income Supports

Almost one quarter (24%) of survey respondents noted that supporting youth to access income and funding supports was very challenging, and an additional 49% found it somewhat challenging.

Just under half (46%) of respondents stated that more than 50% of young people they worked with were able to access the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). When asked about the barriers to accessing CERB, many responses referenced a lack of clarity in the process and eligibility. Not all young people were aware of the CERB program. For those trying to navigate the application process, there was confusion and a lack of clarity around which programs they were eligible for. They also lacked information about the ‘pros and cons’ of applying for CERB compared to the support they were receiving pre-pandemic.

Those that had not worked in the previous year were not eligible for CERB as they did not meet the minimum requirement of \$5,000 in earnings over the previous year. For others, accessing a record of employment (ROE) was a barrier to applying. Even for those that may have been eligible for CERB, limited/no access to Wifi and congestion on phone lines were barriers. One respondent also noted that “Many youth we see are homeless and transient who do not have a bank account or have not worked before or have never done their taxes to open up a CRA account.”

Roughly one-third (37%) of youth that accessed CERB lost other forms of income support, most citing the loss or potential to lose funding through Ontario Works. Concerns were also raised about the possibility of needing to pay back funds.

“Some of our youth have accessed it despite not being eligible for it which causes concern for financial effects in the future or use of the money in ways which we do not support. Those who applied and got it, I’m not sure that they actually qualified and I’m worried they’ll have to pay it back in the future.”

“When I inquired with a ODSP worker, I was advised that they have not determined whether those who access CERB funds will experience a clawback on their ODSP funds. This uncertainty may result with some ODSP/OW clients facing financial consequences in the future.”

“The young person who accessed the CERB funding did so because he could not find work or return to the job he had lost hours from before the pandemic started but remained employed by them. Although given advice from staff, he went ahead with the CERB money and did not use as intended, etc. He also did not save any for tax purposes etc. so this will only cause further problems from him in the future.”

The lack of informed decision-making, inconsistent and inequitable access, and the potential for negative unintended consequences is especially concerning for marginalized youth in unstable living situations. Future relief efforts should be more youth-centered and provide adequate safeguards and supports for youth to manage their finances and make decisions that are in their best interests.

Other emergency benefits

“Youth that live in transitional youth housing are supported financially in the program and during the pandemic; staff were not enforcing them contributing; job searching etc. Their only expectation was to stay home and stay safe. We also provided cleaning products and groceries to encourage this.”

Fifty-four percent (54%) of respondents said youth were able to access other emergency benefits, which included:

- *Accessing Social/Income Assistance and Funding for Persons with Disability (ex. Ontario Works & Ontario Disability Support Program)*
- *Children’s Services COVID-19 relief funds, particularly to extend and top up benefits for youth that would have aged out of care*
- *Student relief funds*
- *Family relief funds*
- *Emergency funds received by the organization that can be directed to youth (ex. security deposit, rent relief, and housing start-up supplies)*
- *Provincial rent subsidy*
- *Local rent supplements*

Implications & Concerns for the Well-Being of Young People

Socioemotional Well-Being, Mental Health & Substance Use

“...drug use has increased and mental health needs have been complex to assess. Need to create a sense of purpose for youth within their community, by engaging with the community to strengthen empathy and opportunities.”

In May 2020, Canada’s Chief Public Health Officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, issued a statement regarding growing concerns about the impact of COVID-19 “on the ongoing public health crisis of opioid-related overdose deaths and problematic substance use in Canada more broadly.”⁶ Our survey questions only asked specifically about substance use and harm reduction, however qualitative responses across the survey revealed that the disruption of daily life, relationships and support networks due to COVID-19 and public health recommendations have had an array of impacts on young people’s socioemotional wellbeing, mental health and substance use patterns

Many youth have experienced social isolation as a result of disconnection from family and natural supports, services and community.

within the first few months of the pandemic. The themes and challenges are echoed in the preliminary findings of the ongoing national study *Youth Homelessness: Mental Health and Substance Use During COVID-19*.⁷ The full analysis and results of the study is expected for release in the fall of 2020 and will point to important learnings about the impacts of COVID-19 in this area.

6 Public Health Agency of Canada. (29 May 2020). Statement from the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada on COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/news/2020/05/statement-from-the-chief-public-health-officer-of-canada-on-covid-198.html>

7 Thulien, N.S., Nobel, A., Daley, M., French, D., Hwang, S.W., & Kidd, S. (2020). Youth homelessness: Mental health and substance use during COVID-19. <https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/youth-homelessness-mental-health-and-substance-use-during-covid-19>

Respondents to our survey converged on themes around the socioemotional impacts of the pandemic on youth. **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.** While it was noted in the previous survey that some youth were engaging more with mental health supports as services moved online, qualitative responses to the second survey have shown that this is not always the case. Indeed, Thulien et al. (2020) have noted that for the most marginalized and/or entrenched youth, accessing, participating in and benefitting from virtual supports is more difficult.

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. 61% of respondents noticed increases in substance use during COVID-19, which could coincide with worsening mental health and the disconnection/disengagement from support. Stress about the pandemic, boredom, disruption in daily routines, and the lack of daily motivation and goal-setting were noted by some respondents as contributing factors to increased use of substances or relapse. Only 43% reported that youth were able to access supports needed to manage substance use during the pandemic, while 17% were unsure and 40% said ‘no’.

Some noted increases in alcohol consumption and smoking cigarettes, in particular. However, an unexpected consequence of COVID-19 response and shut-down has been the disruption of the drug supply, resulting in the reduction of some street drugs. Changes in the drug supply resulted in some young people turning to whatever was available including legal substances. While the supply of some drugs has been reduced, some youth may turn to alternative substances that are not their drug of choice and may be tainted or ‘cut’ with unknown substances (ex. Switching from fentanyl to crack cocaine). This can have adverse effects that could jeopardize a young person’s housing or increase their risk of overdose and death⁸ “at a time when service providers are unable to perform CPR” (Survey respondent).

Thulien et al.’s preliminary report stated that 37% of service providers reported an increase in overdoses. Access to harm reduction supplies (ex. Naloxone kits, clean needles, safe supply and substitutions) and services are essential to responding to these changes, however only 67% of respondents to our survey said youth were able to access harm reduction supplies during the pandemic, and youths’ access to harm reduction services (ex. Safe injection sites) remains unclear. Where organizations were

 8 Public Health Agency of Canada. (29 May 2020). Statement from the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada on COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/news/2020/05/statement-from-the-chief-public-health-officer-of-canada-on-covid-198.html>

seeing increased need, they related how they are proactively adding an additional outreach shift that operates later, deploying harm reduction tactics to decrease cigarette sharing, providing naloxone kits or working with agencies providing harm reduction and could make those connections for youth. Efforts have also been made in communities like Edmonton, Alberta to increase awareness about overdose prevention and intervention at organizations that may not have historically offered harm reduction services, but could be interacting with young people at risk of overdose during the pandemic.

While access to supports may still be available, there are barriers with some services closing, reducing hours or the number of clients they can serve at a time, or removing options like walk-in support. The lack of youth-specific beds for substance disorder treatment was also noted as an issue. Access to technology and the internet is, yet again, referenced as a barrier to some youth getting support.

“They still have access to supports but the youth are not as interested in engaging in supports that aren’t face-to-face (we don’t yet have webcams in place in all residential programs). Some youth have tried to attend virtual AA meetings, but it has been a flop because of technical issues etc”

An added layer of complexity is the interplay between disconnection from services/supports, social isolation, income supports and substance use. Those who are living alone, feeling disconnected from their communities and support networks, experiencing a loss of a daily routine and receiving a sudden influx of cash through emergency benefits have in some cases increased substance use, therefore increasing their risk of overdoses and death during COVID-19. To be clear, this is not to state that access to income supports is the cause of increased substance use, nor that youth should not receive income support. As the call for a national income floor/foundation grows (e.g. basic income or guaranteed annual income), more discussion and collaboration with young people and service providers is needed to determine how best apply a positive youth development and harm reduction approach to income supports.

As we continue to see throughout this pandemic, COVID-19 illustrates the existing challenges for young people in Canada. In particular, it exposes social stigma and the criminalization related to illegal substance use for youth. One respondent provided a snapshot into the interconnected web of systems, structures, policies, legal frameworks and intrusions in their privacy that youth experiencing homelessness must endure on a daily basis as they seek to stabilize their lives.

In one paragraph we see how the interplay between systems, each with their own set of policies, creates conditions where young people are driven into unsafe use of substances:

“This is challenging for youth even without Covid adding the extra complexity. Youth in care of [child and family services] and staying in foster homes and group homes and Emergency Placement Shelters generally have limited freedoms in terms of keeping their harm reduction supplies within their ‘homes’, therefore they must be very skilled at hiding them and risk having them removed from them and being disciplined in some way for simply possessing them. Youth tend to take small quantities of harm reduction supplies to minimize the risk associated with being caught with them. They also seem to rely (more than adults) on being ‘doctored’ by others who provide them with the supplies which may or may not be safe. The person doing the ‘doctoring’ may also not be safe. Youth on Probation are often prescribed by the courts that they must abstain from any illicit drug use, therefore the act of possessing harm reduction supplies has repercussions to their freedom. Youth anecdotally tell me that they regularly have their belongings stolen, likely as a function of not having a ‘safe’ place to sleep. So despite their intentions to use substance as safely as possible, they have difficulty keeping the safety equipment handy. Also, when youth are released from jail to an Emergency Placement Shelter, my experience with trying to locate them after their release is that there is a significant number of youth who leave these placements without another suitable housing plan in place for them.”

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. Some young people may be in stable enough conditions to make use of online or phone-based supports, however it is not always possible for youth with complex needs, including mental health, substance use and concurrent challenges, to get what they need through these service models. Working with frontline practitioners and young people to find a safe and appropriate balance between in-person and remote support will be essential moving forward.

FROM THE FRONTLINES: Dealing with Distress and Boredom

Youth Housing Provider, Ontario

Many of the services that were available to the youth closed temporarily, isolating them in their apartments. The housing support made the decision to stop doing onsite visits during COVID-19 and opted to offer support by phone. This became a struggle for the youth as it isolated them even more and I found myself becoming the support system for the youth. Prior to the pandemic we had worked hard to get a fridge and freezer donated to our building and also had someone donate the time to hook up the electrical outlet so that we could plug them in onsite (in the unfinished basement). I made many Facebook inquiries for food donations, diapers (there are two youth who have infants) and other needs to assist with supporting the youth and to ensure they had food security as accessing the food bank became difficult due to lack of transportation and the fear of going into the community. We maintain a food storage closet on site for ease of access. I also used Facebook to seek out groups who were doing food prep and we managed to get the youth in our building chef-created fresh meals each week. I pick them up and deliver them to the youth every Wednesday.

As the immense impact of COVID-19 was unexpected and truly unknown, the initial needs of the youth as far as COVID-19 procedures for cleaning, disinfecting, social distancing were not clearly addressed so we made sure that they had cleaning products, face masks and some reassurance that it was going to be alright. There was much anxiety and fear regarding health concerns and the extent of the pandemic amongst the youth, especially those with babies.

We had some youth who struggled badly with mental health issues, one who attempted suicide. We had set the building up with panic buttons in each unit so it was easy for the youth to alert the ambulance when this happened so it did not become a tragedy. This youth found relatives she could stay with for extra support after this incident.

We have found that some of the youth resorted to drinking which caused problems within the building. Because we tried to be onsite at least twice a week, it was easy for me to recognize when one of the youth was struggling and I could alert additional support or the housing support worker that they needed to step in. I believe the drinking started because there was nothing for the youth to do when the weather was bad or when there was a lack of social interaction. We have engaged some of the

youth with planting a vegetable garden and have provided sidewalk chalk so that they could express themselves through art in an attempt to kill their boredom.

The youth in the building began to support each other as much as they could, sharing food, and assisting with child care to give the parents a break as those services had also been interrupted. We hired one of the youth to do the weekly cleaning in the common areas of the building to keep them motivated and so that they could earn some extra money. I would spend time chatting with the youth when I was on site to check in on them. Sometimes all they needed was to feel connected.

| Navigating unsafe living situations and relationships

“The social work team is concerned as we have recognized a decrease in folks accessing services and may be living in unsafe living arrangements. It, however, cannot be confirmed as youth are isolating from services. There has been a notable decrease in young women accessing services.”

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

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. Based on what youth sector respondents have observed in the field there is great cause for concern that more young people are entering unsafe living arrangements, experiencing interpersonal conflict at home, and/or experiencing domestic violence.

Concerns have been raised in the survey response and by advocates more broadly that victims of domestic abuse may find themselves trapped with their abusers during the shutdown, making online or phone supports more difficult to use. This was particularly noted as a concern for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth that may be staying with unsupportive and/or abusive family members. Decreased access to services, especially among young women, and less face-to-face contact between youth and workers results in fewer opportunities for youth to disclose risks, and these relationships and experiences of conflict or violence may be driven further underground. This makes it challenging for workers to do proper safety planning and risk management with youth.

Sudden and unsupported reconnection and confinement with family in order to meet COVID-19 isolation and distancing requirements has increased the need for diversion and mediation supports and increased caseloads for family support workers.

“We see challenges with families isolating at home and conflict arising. Over time, we have seen issues increase as the pandemic goes on. Conflict is often interpersonal, related to mental health (anxiety, stress) and/or based on financial pressures families are facing.”

Some youth are couchsurfing and staying with friends less, due to people’s heightened sense of risk during the pandemic. This leaves them to turn to unsafe living arrangement like trap houses, homophobic/transphobic family homes, staying with strangers, or sleeping rough. Other respondents remarked on some of the ways that increased isolation, disconnection from services and spaces, and substance use during the pandemic are interacting and impacting safety:

“An example, we have been supporting three young women in our program who have recently reported a sexual assault. All three situations had a similar situation that preceded the attack. Due to the [closure] of all the restaurants, pubs, bars, beaches etc. there is nowhere to drink/use and connect with other people. This has been hard on many youth and some have sought that type of interaction in other ways. This has led these youth to drinking with people they didn’t know in houses they didn’t know where they were then assaulted. It has driven youth into increasingly vulnerable situations whereby they are experiencing further abuse and trauma.”

Responding to Safety Concerns

“Online prevention to help them access educational pieces on creating safe space and managing what they have control on in their home space.”

Organizations are responding to safety concerns under difficult conditions, while attempting to maintain a person-centred approach to providing supports and services.

- *Increased diversion services to find alternative housing arrangements*
- *Connecting youth to counselling services*
- *Sharing information and resources to help youth and families in emergencies and to navigate supports and identify both personal and external resources to manage conflict*
- *Collaborating with other agencies to inform the community about what services are still available (ex. #HereToHelpGB in Grey-Bruce County, Ontario)*
- *Regular check-ins both online (ex. Social media), by phone/text and in-person (ex. food/supply drops)*
- *Safety planning to check-in, review options and manage risk - harm reduction approach*
- *Advocating for expedited referrals to other community organizations/resources*
- *On-call, 24-hour and after hours emergency/crisis support*
- *Working with children’s services*

Disproportionate negative impacts on oppressed youth

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

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. The Movement for Black Lives has sharpened the collective awareness of systemic racism and white supremacy and given a new sense of urgency to the calls for racial equity and justice. Additionally, disaggregated data on COVID-19 cases has shown disproportionate effects on Black and other racialized

communities.⁹ A particular gap in the survey responses is around the breadth and depth of intersections between COVID-19, public health and policy responses, and oppressed or marginalized identities. For example, few specifics were shared about trends among Black, Indigenous and youth of colour aside from disconnection from community and cultural supports.

The challenges facing newcomer and refugee youth were noted in particular. Newcomer youth that may not have been connected to community supports before the pandemic¹⁰ may have an increasingly difficult time, especially when they are unable to access their faith community and/or culturally- and trauma-informed supports. Language barriers preventing access to services, important public health and other COVID-19-related information did not come up in the qualitative responses, but have been raised as concerns early on in the pandemic. It is also unclear what the impact has been on youth that are refugee claimants as the claims process has been halted during the pandemic.

Some also spoke to the situation in rural areas, where youth may not feel the urgency of the pandemic and service providers have had more challenges providing information, upholding public health guidelines, and keeping youth connected to services. As was previously mentioned, transportation is a particular challenge for youth in rural/remote areas, even before the pandemic and without the disruption in services.

It is important to note that the challenges we are seeing for oppressed and otherwise marginalized youth are not new, but amplified.

Responses highlighting the need for specialized supports for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth that can adapt and continue to meet the needs of youth during significant disruptions like COVID-19. This is in light of the risks of youth staying in unsupportive households and the negative toll this can take on mental health during an already difficult time. More information and examples are needed on

how to provide consistent and effective care in-person and online or by phone for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth.

Other groups that need more specific attention and dedicated programs/resources are 16 and 17 year-olds, and parenting youth.

9 Cheung, J. (30 July 2020). Black people and other people of colour make up 83% of reported COVID-19 cases in Toronto. *CBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-covid-19-data-1.5669091>

10 Huncar, A. (31 March 2020). Lost in translation: Newcomers need COVID-19 information in their own languages, advocates say. *CBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-language-barriers-covid-19-low-income-housing-1.5517122>

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.

Moratoria on Exits from Care

An important development that started early into the emergency response to COVID-19 was the advocacy efforts to stop young people from aging out of government care. As noted in the first report, changes to youths' employment prospects, school plans, and potential difficulties finding housing necessitated ongoing professional and financial supports during the pandemic. The following is a snapshot of the state of exits from care across Canada at the time of this report's release:

Status of exits from care moratoria by province/territory

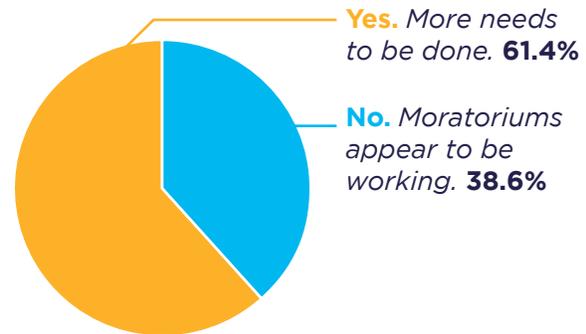
A federal moratorium for the First Nations youth aging out of care is in place for at least 6 months, or as long as the outbreak lasts.



While stopping exits from care is a positive step during the immediate COVID-19 pandemic, 61% of respondents stated that more needs to be done to address disruptions of services and supports for youth exiting care.

Inconsistency of responses to COVID-19 is a common theme in the youth sector's interactions with child protection. More communication and clarity are needed around protocols for supporting youth that are within the age of protection and have left home during COVID-19. In some cases it has become more difficult to get child protective services involved, meaning some youth are not accessing resources that may be available to them.

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



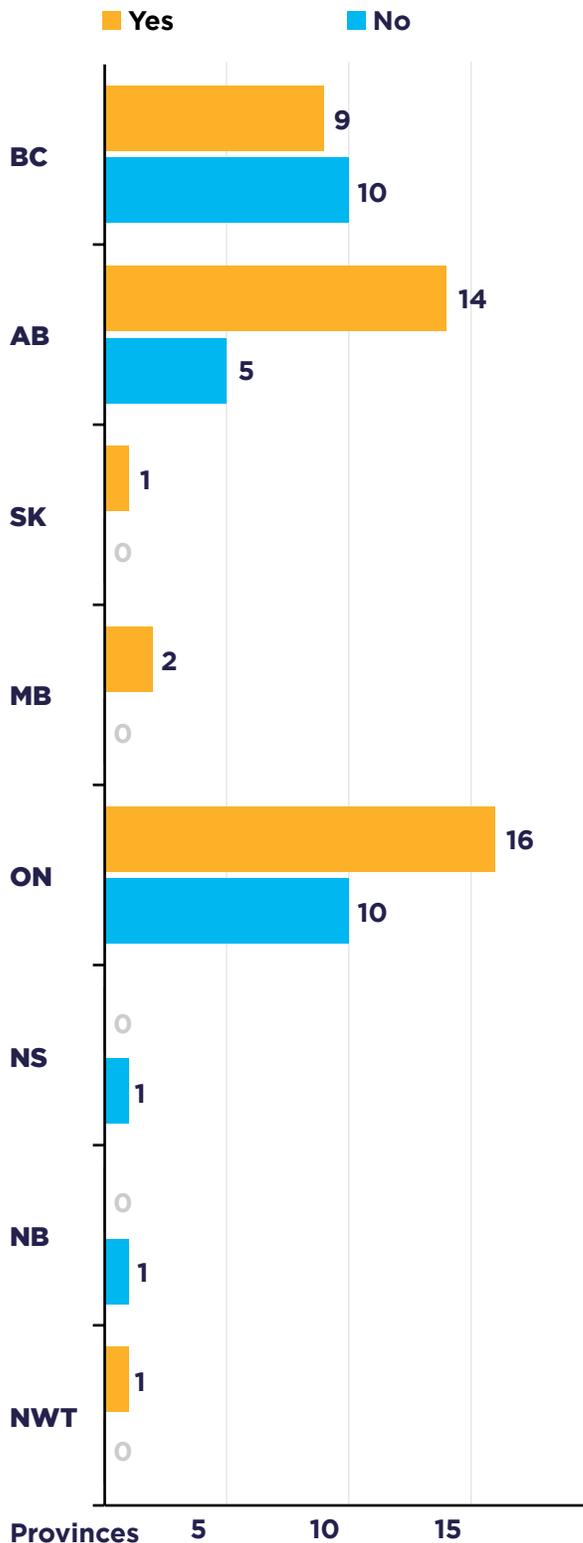
“We had a 14 year old female who had left home and when we called CSS there was no clear direction on how to support them.”

There are also concerns about how to access and stay in contact with youth that “may be vulnerable to sex abuse etc. within the confines of the space that is considered their “home””. Better communication and follow-through are needed to find, support and provide information to young people during COVID-19, including young people that have recently aged out before the moratoria.

“Transitional case workers for older children to understand how life is changing with the pandemic. Knowledge translation workers to help explain in plain language what is happening and how we can help these youth with expedited access to referrals”

The moratoria may also be inconsistently applied given the following comment from a respondent in Alberta: “Some areas are trying to ignore [the moratorium] and saying that the youth still is being cut off or decisions are being made case by case. Youth aren't also being told about this so they don't fight back on being cut off and just agree and sign to end their support thinking that this is still happening and nothing has changed.” More research is needed to understand the extent of this issue.

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



Extending 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. This is especially pressing as employment prospects for young people are limited and disrupted.

“A main disruption for youth at this point stems from the financial perspective. Many youth who were transitioning off of the support provided to them through a child welfare agency were transitioning in to, or, established in, work that has now been suspended. If they lose their financial support before they are able to return to work they will lose their housing.”

There is an opportunity to address the long-standing challenge of young people's poor exits from care. Indeed, survey respondents commented on the need for better exit planning to prevent the decline in young people's well-being that can occur with age cut-offs. Gradual transitions with longer timelines and aftercare and follow-up would ensure youth do not experience such a steep "drop off" when they exit care. Respondents specifically stated that transition plans should include income supports allocated for highly at-risk youth, alternative employment opportunities, rent supplements, counselling dollars to support young people exiting care financially. They also called for more housing options and alternatives, especially for high needs/ high risk youth (ex. youth with mental health and substance use challenges), and youth that cannot live in congregate settings. Young people also require support to maintain their housing during the pandemic, including home visits.

In addition to extending moratoria and creating transition policies, respondents wanted to see more established, visible, dedicated resources, programs and services for queer youth as well as cultural supports and services for Indigenous youth that can continue throughout disruptions like COVID-19.

PART 2: HOW THE YOUTH-SERVING SECTOR CONTINUES TO COPE WITH THE CRISIS

Our first survey scratched the surface of some of the impacts COVID-19 has had on the youth-serving sector. More detailed responses provided in the second survey illustrate the amplification of pre-existing challenges around capacity, resources and staff wellness. Whom these organizations and staff serve, what they are able to provide, and how they operate have all been affected. In this section we explore the range of changes to organizations' work, both positive and negative, and outline the ongoing needs of the sector during the current and subsequent phases of the pandemic.

In-Flows from Other Systems, Institutions and Communities



Systems and communities across Canada were seeking ways to decrease the number of individuals in institutional and congregate settings. This resulted in the closure of primary, secondary and post-secondary schools, and discharges from correctional facilities and hospitals. Respondents have noted varying degrees of increased inflows from these institutions and systems into the homeless-serving system.

Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents noted discharge/exits from institutions (hospitals, corrections, university residences) or breakdowns in children's aid placements. Recent releases from correctional facilities put a strain on the shelter population, and people have arrived at shelters without case management support. Some participants felt that young people within this population were largely ignored. Additionally, when university residences were shut down, some youth housing programs experienced an increase in the number of students who required support to find immediate and urgent housing.

Beyond breakdowns in child protection placements, a respondent noted issues with for-profit youth residences (group homes) that existed even before COVID-19 and now have greater urgency. They raised concerns about significant discrepancies in how for-profit group homes operate from non-profit providers including: “staff training, wages, working conditions, professional development, staff morale, turnover, compliance with regulations, and how funds are allocated.” This respondent stressed that young people living in group homes at this time need support to prevent being discharged when they turn 18.

Ensuring people with no fixed address are not discharged from hospitals into homelessness has been an ongoing challenge for the homeless-serving sector,¹¹ however one participant noted that inflows from hospitals in their area had improved during the pandemic:

“We are working with many systems in the same ways, with adjustments. There is much more teleconferencing happening. I think one positive that has come out of this is an increased collaboration around discharge from systems (specifically hospital). There is less “dumping” on the shelter or housing programs and an increase in discharge planning.”

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.

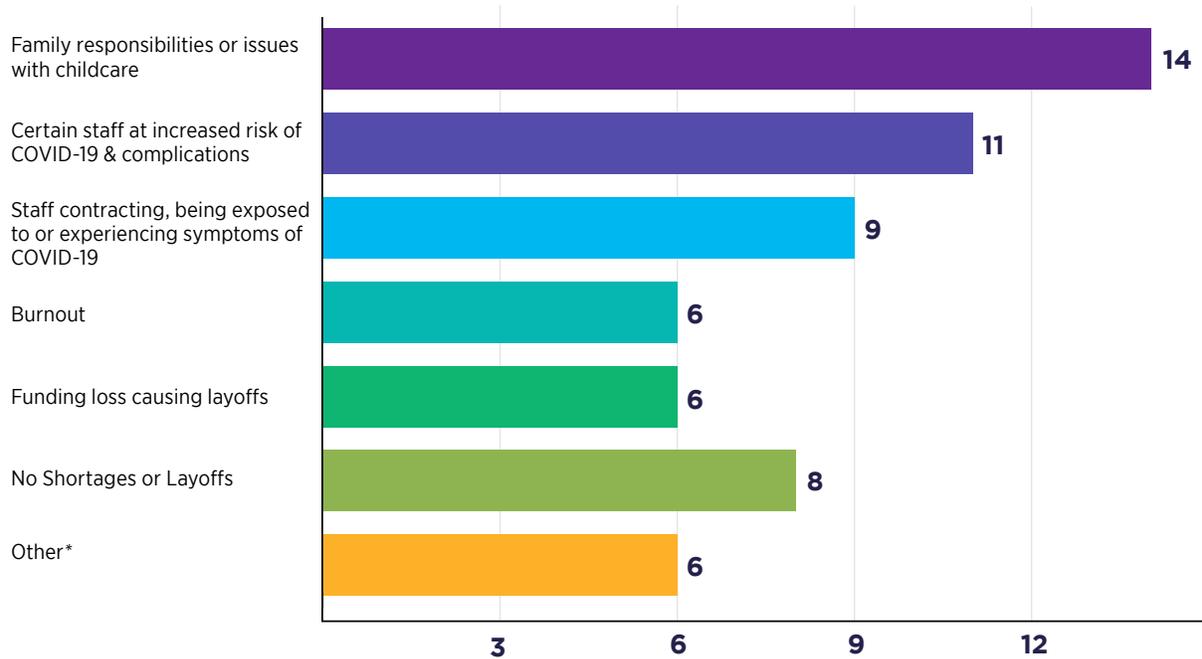
Staffing and Wellness

Youth-serving organizations have had to navigate the nuanced implications of COVID-19 on staff compliments to meet the needs of young people at-risk of or experiencing homelessness. In March, provinces and territories created guidelines to determine which sectors and services were deemed “essential”, advising that those who were able should work from home, while other businesses and sectors should close their doors entirely. Many parents and guardians that are essential workers or are still able to work from home have had a difficult time balancing work and family as schools and childcare facilities closed.

¹¹ Buccieri, K. et al. (2019). Hospital discharge planning for Canadians experiencing homelessness. *Housing, Care and Support*, 22(1), pp. 4-14.

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. Roughly a quarter (26%) of responding agencies experienced no staffing shortages or layoffs at the time of the survey.

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)

In weekly Community of Practice calls, frontline practitioners have met to discuss the impacts of COVID-19 on program models, service delivery and their staff teams. 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.

It was also noted that where COVID-19 cases and organizations’ caseloads are lower, staff are better able to cope and youth are “healthy, calm and cooperative” with the changes being made to respond to the pandemic. Reductions in programming for

some organizations (drop-ins, trainings) may have actually made staff more mentally healthy. This reinforces the need to think about the impact of high caseloads and staff responsibilities on mental health and wellbeing. Given youths' need for stability and reliable ongoing support from positive adults in their lives, the wellbeing of staff that work directly with young people is critical.

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.

Motivation, Validation and Solidarity

Organizations have tried to combat the isolation and increased stress of working during the pandemic by finding ways to boost staff morale and stay connected to their team members. Increased communication and supervision, regular team check-ins and debriefs, showing appreciation and acknowledging the work being done, and validating staff fears and anxieties. In many cases this is done through video chats, sometimes including games or other fun ways to break up the week and connect with each other. Other organizations are doing Random Acts of Kindness and giving 'shout-outs' to staff on their organizational social media page.

“We’ve developed a weekly newsletter called ‘Keeping the Faith’ that contains good news stories, tips for mental and physical wellness, COVID updates, etc. We have held virtual Town Halls to bring us together and are in the midst of a “Notes of Encouragement” campaign.”

Increased Flexibility for Staff

A number of respondents also noted that their organizations have made accommodations to be more flexible and responsive to the needs of staff during the pandemic. For example, some organizations have implemented flexible and/or reduced hours (from 40 to 30-32/week) with no changes to wage, and/or have increased hourly rates for frontline staff. Others have offered increased time off, paid days off if a break is needed, or unpaid time off without requiring a leave of absence. One respondent stated that their organization was “creating a 100% model that identifies staff needs for reduced workload and increasing workload on staff who are able to provide extra support and take on the workload of those requiring a reduction.”

Access to Professional Support

In addition to the informal support and changes to hours, compensation and time off, respondents noted the professional supports they had access to both within and externally from their organizations. Some professional supports, such as counselling, are covered through employment benefits or are a part of regular procedures (ex. on-call counselling supports and therapy after incidents). Other survey participants had access to support through a robust Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP). A few organizations have also worked with their in-house therapy and trauma teams or created committees to find ways to support staff.

“We’ve also launched a series of live webinars and online sessions through our Coping With Current Events series, which have focused on a number of wellness related topics, that are open to everyone, including staff.”

“Our in-house trauma team has a dedicated google classroom for youth and for staff that has videos, activities, support discussions and information to help both staff also address their personal wellness family dynamics, mental health and compassion fatigue.”

“We have an employee social mental health committee that is working on coping mechanisms and self care during this time. We are offering free mediation sessions, grounding techniques, video chat to talk and connect weekly, and letting go activities.”

It should be noted that not all respondents felt that their organizations were succeeding in addressing staff wellness, due to inadequate employee benefits or just having to make do with or trying to extend measures already taken to support staff before COVID-19.

“We have been doing all we can, but the current situation is very tough for our residential workers. [...] it’s still very challenging to ensure mental and physical wellness at this time.”

Youth sector organizations and staff demonstrate steadfast commitment, resilience and professionalism to the youth and families they serve in the face of COVID-19. Finding new ways to work, connect with youth during lockdown, maintain connections to critical public systems, and working tirelessly often themselves in

physically or emotionally unsafe conditions, youth sector organizations and their staff are an often overlooked and undervalued resource. Supporting staff to cope with the stress, anxiety and trauma experienced on the job, as well as advance personally and professionally both during and after COVID-19, needs to be an ongoing conversation. This may be the key to unlocking the full potential of the youth-serving sector for positive change and impact in communities.

Funds & Fundraising Ability

Federal Funding

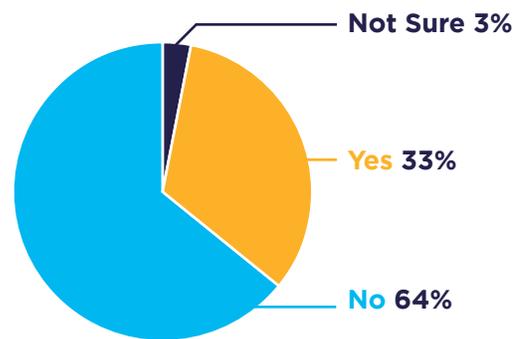
On April 4th, a few weeks after Canada began its emergency response to COVID-19, **the federal government announced \$157.5 million extra funding to support the homeless-serving sector** through the Reaching Home program that provides funds to 61 (soon to be 67) Designated Communities for their coordinated response to homelessness. 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)*

There was disparity among respondents in terms of who received federal funding. In some cases respondents reported that their efforts to adapt services did not receive support through Reaching Home funds.

Received Reaching Home top-up funds?



3:1 respondents say that have accessed federal funds say the funding meets their emergent needs.

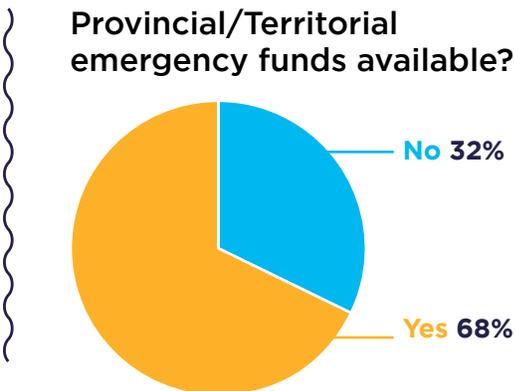
“We are developing our own coordinated access points for all services during covid, we have located a university residence to use in case of capacity overflow, and we have gone to a 24/7 diversion model. We are expected to fund this ourselves.”

In others funding was directed to crisis responses or urban centres with more COVID-19 cases.

“The focus in our community is going to shelters not those trying to live in the community [...] youth living in the community appear to be a forgotten area of financial need.”

“While the funds have been helpful in addressing a COVID-19 emergency response (Outreach, Shelter, Food), limited funds have been allocated for the provision of housing. As it pertains to youth, I’m not aware of any Reaching Home funds being designated specifically for youth programming.”

Provincial, Territorial and Other Funding Sources



“Public Health has said they would provide funding to put new intakes in a hotel until we were confident that they were COVID-negative. There is also funding through the United Way of Pictou County that can help us with things like food, transportation, etc.”

Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) also indicated that their organizations were able to access provincial/territorial emergency funds. A few were unsure if they received provincial funding because that information was not available to them. Respondents reported that provincial funding came from departments or ministries responsible for housing and homelessness, public health, children’s services, and in one case the Office of the Attorney General.

Organizations accessed the following types of funding:

- *Provincial loans/grants (11 respondents);*
- *Municipal funding and community foundations (including United Way grants) (8 respondents); and*
- *Other funding, including private donations (1 respondent) and national organizations like Second Harvest's FoodRescue.ca (1 respondent).*

These streams were often mixed with Reaching Home Funding and other private or local sources which is not unlike conditions for the housing and homelessness serving sector prior to COVID-19. The youth serving sector like much of civil society are very effective at combining and leveraging resources to create the best supports for the communities they serve.

The amount of funding varied significantly from a few thousand dollars to support basic needs to tens of thousands of dollars for more robust program support and relief. At the time of the survey many organizations were still waiting to find out if their funding applications were approved.

| Use of Funding & Concerns for the Future

Funding was used for a variety of purposes, including:

- *Operational funds: Shelter operations; Reopening drop-in; Adapting housing model*
- *Wage subsidies; Hazard pay/Top-ups; Accommodating staff to work from home; Emergency staffing; Overtime; Diversion worker*
- *Cleaning services; PPE*
- *Individualized Supports & Immediate needs: Food, Transportation, Basic supplies, Counselling, Laundry services, Harm reduction supplies*
- *Housing: Rent supplements & Shelter costs, Hotel accommodation, Youth Isolation site*
- *Emergency client costs for those unable to access emergency benefits (rent, damage deposits, phones, etc.)*
- *Public education*

This list contains costs new to COVID-19 including PPE, isolation sites and emergency client costs. Reaching Home top-up funding was sufficient for 75% of respondents' organizations to meet their emergent needs. Those for whom the funds were not sufficient noted the high cost of personal protective equipment (PPE) to meet their anticipated needs, covering shelter staff when they fall ill, and the lack of focus

beyond emergency response especially for youth. It is possible that some of these costs were offset by reduced costs in other areas due to the shutting down of services.

Federal, provincial and territorial top-up funding was a welcome and critical part of the overall response to homeless and at-risk individuals during the pandemic, but respondents describe uneven access to the funds and requirements for funding. Where respondents did not receive Reaching Home funding, it was not always clear if that is because they were not eligible in the first place or if youth were not a local priority. Some respondents were unsure where their funding originated, as funding streams from other orders of government can be combined/stacked at the local level with private funding.

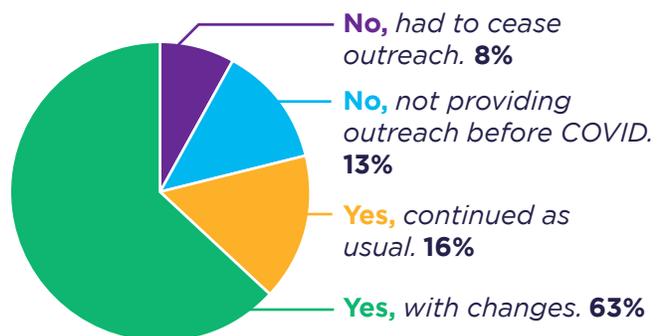
While funding seemed relatively stable and some did not require top-ups at the time of the survey (May-June 2020), as noted in the first summary report, there are concerns about needs in the future if the pandemic interrupts upcoming fundraising events and initiatives.

Adaptations During COVID-19

Outreach & Other Services

In the previous survey, respondents were asked about whether they were providing outreach services. The second survey attempted to dig deeper into what outreach services were being provided, the challenges facing organizations, and adaptations they were making.

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



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.

For those continuing to do outreach, services included:

- *Offering no-contact drop-offs of groceries, cheques etc.*
- *Meeting face-to-face for crisis support, rehabilitation and addiction services, or weekly house check-ins*
- *Connecting youth with housing supports, including access to isolation centres, physically-distanced or virtual apartment viewings*
- *Assisting youth to identify personal goals, access educational resources/opportunities, employment services and training, life skills training, safety planning, health/mental health, legal or other community services*
- *Supporting access to funding*
- *Providing access to food, clothing & showers for youth living on the streets*
- *Providing support for basic needs etc. to youth on housing waitlists*

As we note throughout the report, organizations had to adapt their services in a short period of time to account for the pandemic, often demonstrating significant flexibility and creativity to respond to dramatic change. **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; and*
- *Creating staff bubbles in the event that a staff member tests positive for COVID-19.*

“Staffing hours have changed for certain programs to go out in community, screening processes, and cross over between staff being monitored. Only certain staff can work together so they do not cross over with other staff if there is a positive COVID case they may have come in contact with.”

Other services have also had to adapt to COVID-19. Social distancing, reduction of shelter beds, increased cleaning/sanitation, and screening of staff were all named as adaptations to services. Others identified that the movement of youth was more restricted to keep them at home or in their units and avoid going out every day. Some organizations have reduced the number of shelter beds and created new intake procedures and “house rules” to adjust to the pandemic.

One respondent stated that some youth that have less capacity for independence still require a more “hands-on” approach to stay connected and supported through the pandemic. This raises the question of how stay at home and physical/social distancing requirements can be equitably applied to young people that are unable to live fully independently, but do not need round-the-clock care.

Respondents in both surveys consistently noted the increased use of technology and social media to connect, deliver services, and share information when face-to-face contact is restricted.

“We also re-created drop-in groups virtually and started multiple online activities to fight social isolation such as art therapy, BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Colour] drop-in and a group on Mindfulness Skills for Coping with Stress.”

However, adapting services through the use of technology comes with its own barriers as youth have varying access to devices and/or internet, or in some cases they prefer not to connect by phone.

Protocols for Youth (Re-)Entering Housing Programs

Where respondents operate housing programs they have had the additional concerns of keeping residents safe from exposure to COVID-19. **This has led to new procedures designed to manage re-entry and mitigate exposure, such as:**

- *Following and enforcing PPE protocols and provincial/territorial/local health guidelines*
- *Conducting regular public health inspections and risk assessments*
- *Using COVID-19 screening tools and social distancing during intakes*
- *Requiring two weeks of self-isolation in a reserved and sterilized private room, dedicated isolation residence or hotel upon intake or if youth have symptoms of COVID-19*
- *Providing direct entry if youth test negative for COVID-19 - Shelter Health Networks may provide testing*
- *Coaching for youth living independently in scattered site housing*
- *Ensuring scattered site private market rentals have been properly cleaned and youth have cleaning supplies and PPE when they move in*

In communities that have not seen as many COVID-19 cases, they have worked with partner agencies and/or the province on a case-by-case basis to meet young people's needs.

Collaboration Across Systems/Sectors

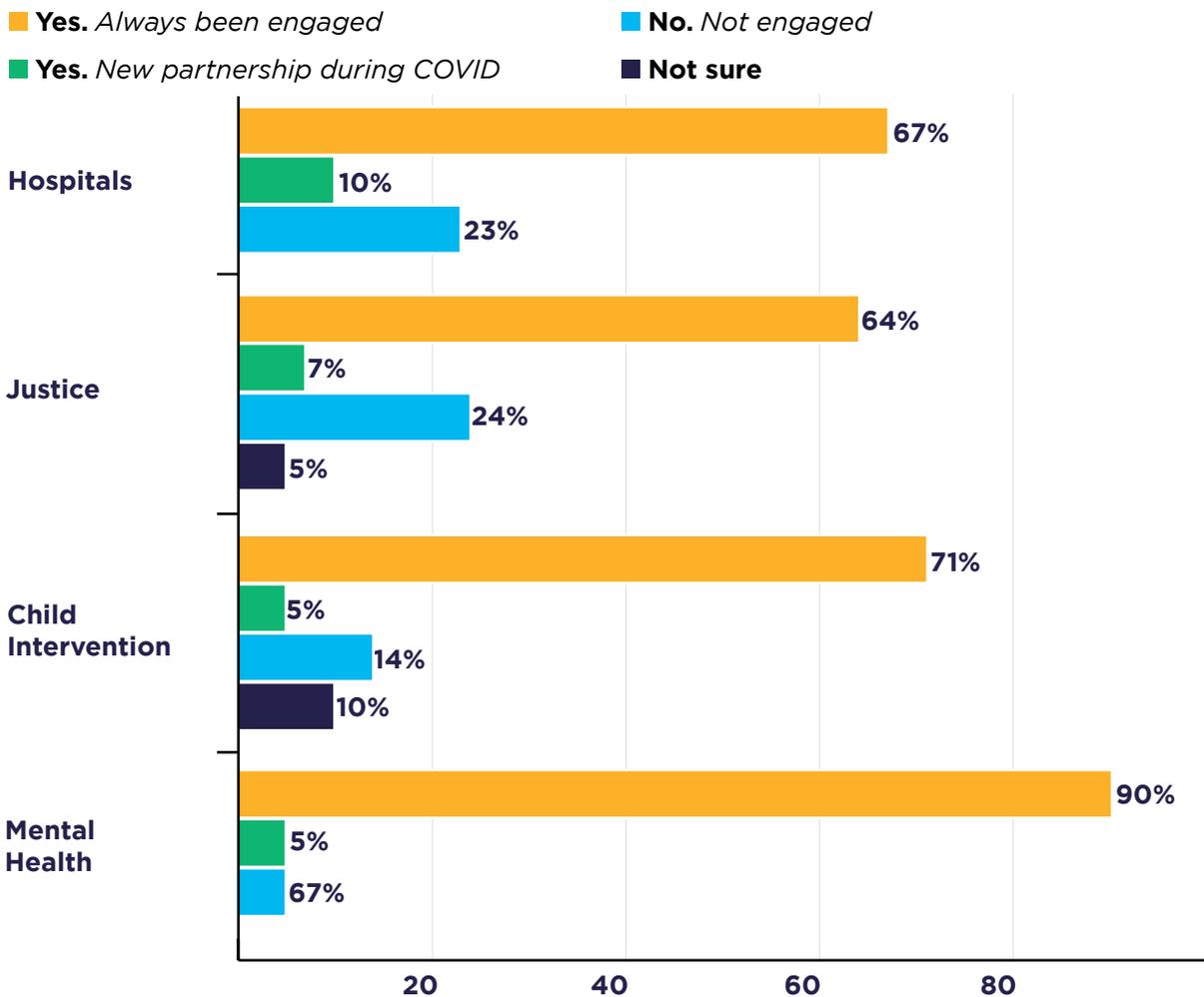
In our March youth-sector survey, some participants identified the emergence of increased and even improved collaboration within the homelessness sector, other sectors and orders of government with the onset of COVID-19 while others observed engagement with or support from public systems dropped off dramatically. Our follow-up survey supported these varying experiences of increased, decreased or stable collaboration with systems. One youth service provider on the East Coast noted that with little impacts seen on their work due to COVID-19, collaboration with other systems has continued on as usual:

“Nothing has changed for us during COVID-19. We continue to work closely with all community partners, including those identified, to ensure our youth remain healthy and adequately serviced. In terms of “how”, we are still open to receiving referrals from community partners and we are still able to refer our youth to various outside resources when required. We

are also continuing holistic case management planning with community partners and engaging on specific issues when needed to support our youth. We utilize ZOOM technology with respect to intake interviews, as well youth engage with mental health supports via phone and ZOOM as well.”

Currently, and despite some increases in the number of discharges from systems like Justice, Health and Child Welfare into the homelessness sector (see [In-Flows from Other Systems, Institutions and Communities](#) above), the majority of participants continue to report increased and improved collaboration across systems and sectors well into the pandemic while some report a disconnect with systems that they had previously relied upon. In fact, COVID-19 continues to reveal some of the gaps between systems and sectors while being a catalyst for greater cooperation.

Working with Systems During COVID-19



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.

In many ways, COVID-19 has shifted the dynamics between the youth-serving sector and other systems and institutions that contribute to or are a part of the solutions to youth homelessness. As each system has had to quickly adapt and respond, some communities have dug deeply into collaboration and working together, while others have faced challenges and have had to make adjustments along the way.

Youth-serving organizations have developed a number of creative ways to intentionally engage with systems, and some have noted an increase in collaboration and communication. In Edmonton, for example, an Indigenous COVID-19 response manual was created to identify currently available services. In Smiths Falls, Ontario, Cornerstone Landing has been working with mental health and child intervention to get youth access to devices (cell phones, tablets, computers) wifi, and phone plans in order to help them connect with mental health services that have moved online.

Other ways in which the youth sector has begun to work with other systems during COVID-19 is varied and included:

- *Reciprocal referrals and information sharing;*
- *Navigating local/provincial/national public health's COVID-19 response and directives for shelters, child intervention services and others;*
- *Creating COVID-19 response strategies for young people where none existed in the community;*
- *Strategizing on how to help families and youth manage increases in conflict or challenges with mental health;*
- *Teleconferencing to discuss high-risk cases, get updates on youth, problem-solve, and coordinate wrap-around supports;*
- *Discharge planning from jails and hospitals.*

COVID negatively impacted communication pathways between community organizations and between the sector and public systems. In March many offices were suddenly closed, some staff were no longer available, relationships between staff were severed, at least temporarily. Respondents recalled how they quickly leveraged their existing resources to increase and create new communication networks across sectors that enabled critical supports for young people to continue.

“The social work team has divided ourselves into sectors of interest whereby each social worker has maintained collaborative networks of information sharing with specific sectors of interest (e.g. immigration, harm reduction, etc.). This information is then shared to the whole social work team and to program managers through email updates and a shared spreadsheet of resource updates.”

Some respondents discussed how in their community, collaboration between sectors actually improved during the pandemic:

“We collaborate closely with Alberta Health Services (not so much in terms of hospital units, but as a broader system of care). This includes bi-weekly calls on shelter directives being released, any concern for PPE, and COVID related response. We utilize justice for consult support (liaison officers), and the mental health system within Alberta Health Services.”

Others provided examples of how their efforts to maintain connection and collaboration through the uncertainty of the pandemic had positive impacts on individual young people:

“Child Intervention - We constantly work with child welfare to advocate for clients and ensure they are still able to have access visits with their children. A young woman I was working with was advised that she can no longer have community visits with her child during COVID-19 as the temporary placement order was with the father of her son. After connecting with the family service worker and her lawyer, community visits continued with some clear guidelines.”

Of course, some barriers existed for organizations trying to engage or continue collaboration across systems. As in the first youth sector survey results, a few respondents noted the specific lack of a dedicated COVID-19 response for youth in local cross-systems planning:

“Local organizations have been working together to support the adult population by integrating BC Housing, Interior Health and Outreach to ensure coordination. Unfortunately no youth-specific isolation spaces have been secured”.

Other communities have had greater challenges engaging or staying engaged with other systems that have had to adapt their services during COVID-19. The rapid changes and service restrictions have been difficult to keep on top of in the immediate scramble to adapt and meet public health requirements, which one respondent noted has had negative implications for young people:

“Overall capacity of these systems to support the youth we work with have been significantly diminished. With cancelled or reduced supports available, our staff have to take on a greater burden of care and act outside of their traditional job descriptions. [...] The adjustments being made from these systems partners are admirable given the circumstances, but nonetheless it has had a negative impact on many of the youth we support.”

Connection Between the Civil Society and the Broader Public

In the first survey we saw the emergence of an increased connection between the homeless-serving sector and the broader public, and we can see a continuation and deepening of these connections as the pandemic progresses. 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.

COVID-19 revealed the inherent role that congregate settings like long-term care homes, migrant worker farms and homeless shelters play in spreading deadly disease. Suddenly it started to matter to communities that youth, adults and even families were being warehoused in unsafe situations, whether in emergency shelters or sleeping rough because it threatened community spread. This has been accompanied by growing public sentiment that no one should have to endure these living

conditions. The link between the structural and systemic conditions that created large populations of people experiencing homelessness and the pandemic is beginning to shift public perception towards the need for a rights-based understanding of homelessness and adjacent issues (affordable housing, liveable income floors, etc.) as well as the solutions.

“Also, that decision-makers will see the direct links between a health pandemic and a human rights/social pandemic. That understanding about social determinants of health would gain traction, and government will get serious about health in that framework (basic income, housing, equity, food supply, etc.). By focusing on these factors, we will be much more equipped to tackle the next pandemic - which hopefully will never happen”.

Additionally 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.

“Our hope is that decision-makers will place more value on the non-profit sector and the essential work we do. At the start of the pandemic it was rare to hear ‘community/charitable/non-profit’ in press conferences and subsidy releases. Due to a lot of work by national bodies, such as A Way Home, Imagine Canada, The Canadian Housing Renewal Association, as well as the NS Community Sector Council provincially, that narrative began changing. As we exit the pandemic our services will be more critical than ever and we hope that the light put on the ESSENTIAL work we do because of this crisis will continue to shine.”

PART 3: DESIRE FOR ACTION FROM THE YOUTH SECTOR

Much about the duration and aftermath of COVID-19 remains uncertain. In light of unprecedented and rapid changes to daily life and implications for service delivery, the youth-serving sector has gone to great lengths to ensure young people and families have access to the resources and services they rely on, as well as meet new or growing demands and challenges.

In the coming months and years, as more research is done and the complete picture of the impacts of COVID-19 comes into focus, we will undoubtedly continue to see the urgency of the call for the shift to prevention and the systemic changes this shift requires. While much of the survey and this report have focused on the response across Canada to the immediate crisis, service providers in the youth sector were also asked to share their hopes for change and opportunities for the future beyond the pandemic:

“More collaboration between agencies...no discharges into homelessness or precarious housing even after the crisis is over”

“More inclusion of youth under 18 in initial pandemic plans - adult plans do not work for them. We cannot assume [Children’s Services] will support these youth as they focused on in-care and not community. Develop plans with schools to ensure connections are happening with families/youth identified as high risk: reporting of child abuse and family violence is down - this is not because it has disappeared or actually decreased.”

“Affordable housing, yes basic income, understanding of trans and queer experiences.”

“I think this pandemic has really framed some things for the greater population. I do think it has pointed out how a lot of people have to live on such a small amount of money, so yes, I would agree, guaranteed basic income, and federally managed housing would be amazing. I also believe this is going to create a lot of new people reaching out for substance abuse support and mental health support for the first time, so I think that will go either one of two ways. One option, not much will change, and our staff and resources will just have to figure out a way to deal with the influx, or (And hopefully it’s more aligned with this one!) enough new people reaching out are able to highlight how important our services are to the community, and this will create more funding and conversations about the best ways to move forward.”

“A refocus on the value of connection and relationship. Youth having basic income would allow them to focus on reintegration into the community that is safe for them, without the pressure of having to get income.”

“Youth focused options for housing across a support spectrum from low barrier bridge housing to full permanent supportive housing that is focused on youth development, and mentorship.”

“This has further highlighted for us the need for more prevention and diversion services.”

Action Areas Requiring Renewed & Ongoing Focus

More can be done by governments, funders, researchers, civil society and service providers to ensure that we are not only better equipped to handle the next crisis or major disruption, but to chart a path toward a “new normal” that puts the youth rights first, rather than as an afterthought.

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.

CONCLUSION: WE'RE BETTER TOGETHER

The youth-serving sector in Canada has continued to find ways to show up for young people during the COVID-19 global pandemic, despite significant setbacks and challenges. The work continues to evolve as communities prepare for a possible second wave, recovery and rebuilding. As this report and other research projects are just beginning to demonstrate, the public health and policy responses to COVID-19 from all orders of government were not designed with the most marginalized and oppressed young people in mind, let alone at the table. A one-size-fits-all approach to filling the gaps created or widened by COVID-19 is not effective for supporting Black, Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, 2SLGBTQIA+, rural/remote, parenting and other marginalized and oppressed youth. Whether preparing for a second wave, emergency planning for some other mass disruption, or charting the path toward recovery and rebuilding, the youth-serving sector and young people at-risk or with lived/living experience of homelessness must be involved in co-creating the solutions and response moving forward.

! FROM THE FRONTLINES: Community Coming Together

Jennifer Morrison, *Community Outreach Counsellor/Case Manager at Youth Haven, Orillia, ON*

As an Outreach Counsellor for Youth Haven working out of Orillia representing the only youth shelter in Simcoe County which is located in Barrie, the challenge was not just about housing and homelessness but also food insecurity for our most vulnerable population. It is about the youth and families that I support in this community who prior to the COVID-19 crisis had employment and then sudden insecurity with no income. These individuals were already living in precarious situations where a choice between paying a utility bill and rent was a consent reminder to them. The grocery shopping consisted of attending the local food banks. For a family this would sometimes mean visiting more than one organization just to supplement their food supply over the course of the month. Suddenly they were not able to attend these locations as a result of the restrictions placed upon us due to the immediate risks to our safety.

For the youth who were already at risk of losing their current housing this became more of a concern when their supplemental income was lost. Mental health issues become more prevalent and then 1:1 counselling sessions were no longer permitted and that personal connection to them was suddenly taken away.

So what do we do in a crisis to ensure just the basic needs of our vulnerable are being met? We begin to think “outside the box”. Virtual counselling may not be a new concept for some however for an Outreach Counsellor who generally picks up her clients or meets with them in the community this is a new concept. It is also new for the clients and it presents many challenges. Who has access to the internet now without being able to go to the local library or Tim Horton’s to access the free wifi? How do we ensure that they are still housed safely or have enough food? Well we begin the process of organizing every possible means of communication such as; whatsapp, skype, zoom, texting, calling and instagram video chats. At first it is a challenge to engage however after a few weeks it becomes the norm. Now, counselling sessions have increased beyond the normal capacity yet that does not prevent us from providing the services required to support the needs of our clients.

Now with this “new” way of meeting with our clients I needed to find a way to continue to engage with them when we did not have the option of the 1:1 support. I also began to observe that isolation, food insecurity, basic needs and mental health were a growing concern. As a result of this I implemented a weekly Art Therapy post on our Instagram page and sent it to all our clients and community partners to share. Prior to COVID-19 I facilitated a bi-weekly Art Therapy program for youth at the Orillia Public Library. I also began making Art Therapy “Wellness Bags” and delivered them to clients to assist them during these challenging times.

In the middle of March The Executive Director of The Sharing Place (food sharing centre), in Orillia reached out to me to inquire if I would like some prepared meals to provide to my clients from R Cottage, a local restaurant. I naturally jumped at the opportunity. R Cottage restaurant in Washago had begun to sponsor a meal program Feed a Friend Feed a Family program. Since this began we have had another local restaurant join the initiative Tre Sorelle and to date we have distributed well over 600 meals to members of our community who are food insecure. I pick up the meals and distribute them to The Sharing Place, vulnerable members of our community and to the OPP for community outreach.

This provided me with two amazing opportunities. First, a meal for clients and second the opportunity to do a face to face wellness check. It also provided me with the time to deliver over 400 “Wellness Bags” that consisted of basic need supplies.

This has had a positive impact on the day to day life of everyone involved. For the individuals receiving the meals, “wellness bags” and the heartfelt conversations we have shared has created a sense of community among those who are generally forgotten about.

As a result of the housing crisis and shelters being at capacity there was a sudden need to find other temporary solutions. The request for donations of tents and shelter supplies was then made to our community members. We were able to begin distributing tents to members of our community who were unable to find temporary shelter with the assistance of other community partners.

COVID-19 has provided us with opportunities to work together as a community to support those most vulnerable. This is something that I believe will continue as it has benefited everyone involved in one way or another. Mostly it has proved that compassion and empathy exist when we are faced with a crisis.

I am very proud of our accomplishments as an agency that provides support to vulnerable youth and as a community who have shown that we can all work together to support those who need us most.