YOUTH HOMELESSNESS
IN CANADA: THE ROAD TO SOLUTIONS

A document that outlines solutions to youth homelessness, based on three years of research and consultation with stakeholders across Canada

RAISING THE ROOF
Solutions for Canada's Homeless
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Raising the Roof is Canada's only national charity dedicated to long-term solutions to homelessness. We:

- Fund local, grassroots agencies working to alleviate homelessness in their communities;

- Build awareness among Canadians about the true nature of homelessness today and educate them about how to prevent it in the future;

- Build partnerships by giving people, corporations and organizations the opportunity to participate in solutions.

For more information, go to www.raisingtheroof.org

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INTRODUCTION

Youth homelessness. It's an unacknowledged national crisis.

On any given night, thousands of youth across Canada huddle on street corners, park benches, friends' couches, or in emergency shelters. They are there by circumstance – rarely by choice.

Youth are our future; the continued strength of our country depends in large part on how we raise the next generation. It is our country's responsibility to ensure that they receive the supports they need to develop to their full potential. And it is the right of every young person to have an adequate, affordable home.

Canada is not alone in grappling with the issue of youth homelessness. However, while countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have conducted a clear assessment of the problem and have developed nation-wide plans in response, Canada has not succeeded in either quantifying the issue, or in responding with comprehensive, lasting solutions.

Uncertain economic times have the very real potential to exacerbate this crisis.

There is no better time to act than now.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2006 Raising the Roof launched *Youthworks* – a national initiative aimed at breaking the cycle of homelessness among young Canadians, and supporting them to build a better future. Based on the need to better understand the issue of youth homelessness, we undertook a three-year research project to track and describe the experiences of 689 street-involved youth in three Canadian cities – Calgary, Toronto and St. John's. The project findings and considerable subsequent expert feedback on those findings have enabled us to develop a snapshot of youth homelessness in Canada today.

This paper focuses on three essential service and support system components that address the complex needs of street-involved youth: **prevention, emergency response** and **transitions out of homelessness**. **Prevention** addresses the key triggers of youth homelessness. **Emergency response** – which includes youth shelters, access and outreach programs – seeks to address the immediate needs of street-involved youth to stabilize their situation. **Transitions out of homelessness** is anchored in affordable, supportive accommodation and an array of supports to help youth fulfill their potential and successfully integrate into mainstream society.

Our research shows that street-involved youth often require diverse, multi-faceted, intensive models of support – support that may include appropriate, affordable housing, education, skills training and employment opportunities, health services, mentorship and much more. *System integration of all these elements is therefore of the utmost importance.*

It is also important that these supports are youth-focused; the needs of street-involved youth are very different from those of homeless adults.

The feedback we received from current and previously street-involved youth, service providers and other sector experts across Canada also underscores the need to ensure that services and supports are culturally-appropriate. Examples include but are certainly not limited to Aboriginal youth and other visible minorities, new immigrants, gay or transgendered young people and those with disabilities. Many youth spoke of having great difficulty in accessing the services and supports that they required. There is a clear need to reduce what appears to be a multitude of barriers.

There are many misconceptions about street-involved youth. Prejudice and stereotyping are common and there is little understanding of the social and economic impact of failing to address this issue. Public education will be an important element of any strategic national response.

We believe that one of the strengths of this paper is the extent to which it includes the voices of youth. We strongly urge those involved in solutions to this issue to continue to engage youth in all aspects of planning for services provision and program design, at national and community levels.

Based on *Youthworks* research findings and subsequent input from others, this document outlines: key recommendations on what must be done to give street-involved youth the stability, opportunity and support they need to transition out of street life; some of the commonly understood triggers of youth homelessness; insight into the circumstances and experience of street-involved youth; an assessment of some of the most serious gaps in services and supports; examples of existing 'best practices' that can be part of solutions; and, finally, a Community Checklist tool to help assess and address youth homelessness on a local basis.

While youth homelessness in Canada is a serious and growing issue, there *are* solutions. Strong national leadership and a well coordinated, appropriately resourced plan are needed to bring about those solutions.

It is our hope that this document will help Canadians truly understand the issues of street-involved youth and that it will serve as a catalyst to engage stakeholders across Canada in solutions to youth homelessness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are discussed and supported throughout this paper. They focus on three key aspects of an effective response to youth homelessness: prevention, emergency response, and transitions out of homelessness. They are based on the premise that youth-serving agencies and their community-based partners in government, private and non-profit sectors know what works best in their communities across the country; and that stability and long-term employment are proven positive factors in helping young people move away from the street.

Recommendations

1. **Existing funding:** Secure, long-term and flexible funding to enable successful programs for street-involved youth to continue to develop and grow;

2. **Access to services:** 'One-stop' barrier-free access to services for street-involved youth within their home community;

3. **Education:** More educational opportunities/grant programs for street-involved youth and increased programs that target early school leavers;

4. **Employment:** Increased job training and employment opportunities for street-involved youth, in particular graduates of agency programs;

5. **Housing:** A national housing strategy that includes a continuum of housing specifically for street-involved youth, e.g., youth shelters, transitional housing, co-op housing, safe and affordable housing, as well as supportive housing for youth leaving child protection, foster care and group homes;

6. **Mentorship:** Increased mentorship support aimed at street-involved youth to build self-esteem and develop life skills;

7. **Government leadership:** Leadership and collaboration among federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments in developing a Canada-wide plan to address youth homelessness;

8. **Private sector engagement:** Development of a supportive framework to encourage the private sector to participate in creative solutions to youth homelessness e.g., skills training, employment opportunities, development of supportive work environment;

9. **Government policy:** Development of distinct policies around youth homelessness to address the unique needs of this population.

This document further outlines many of the elements that would comprise a plan to address youth homelessness, with a suggested Community Checklist tool (page 30) that will help communities to assess local needs and priorities within a national framework.

THE *YOUTHWORKS* INITIATIVE

BACKGROUND

In January 2006 Raising the Roof launched **Youthworks** – a national initiative aimed at breaking the cycle of homelessness among young Canadians and supporting them to build a better future.

Recognizing that before we can address the complex issue of youth homelessness we must first understand it, **Youthworks** conducted a three-year research project to track and describe the 'lived experience' of 689 street-involved youth in three Canadian cities – Calgary, Toronto and St. John's. By listening to the youth and their counselors and inviting subsequent feedback on our findings and observations from many stakeholders across the country, we have been able to develop a snapshot of youth homelessness in Canada today.

Many of the findings and observations of homeless youth and service providers in Calgary, Toronto and St. John's are consistent with the characteristics and experience of street-involved youth in other parts of Canada. However, we recognize that unique needs and challenges exist in other provinces, territories and communities. It will be important to assess and address these unique challenges as solutions are developed and implemented.

In their role as members of the **Youthworks** Board of Advisors, some of Canada's most respected researchers, social development and service delivery experts on youth homelessness have contributed their expertise and insights to the **Youthworks** process and this paper. Further consultation occurred during Raising the Roof's **Partners Solving Youth Homelessness** conference in Toronto on November 19-21, 2008. The 250 delegates represented previously homeless or street-involved youth, community service providers, government representatives, corporate executives and leading researchers on youth homelessness, from provinces and territories across Canada. The participants provided a wealth of input on how – as individual communities and as a nation – we can bring about long-term solutions to youth homelessness.

1. Who are our homeless youth?

AGE

| | 40% |
| 35% |
| 30% |
| 25% |
| 20% |
| 15% |
| 10% |
| 5% |
| 0% |

St. John's   Calgary   Toronto   Average

■ 16–18   ■ 19–21   ■ 22–24   ■ 25–29

RESPONSES OBTAINED FROM 483 OF 689 PARTICIPANTS
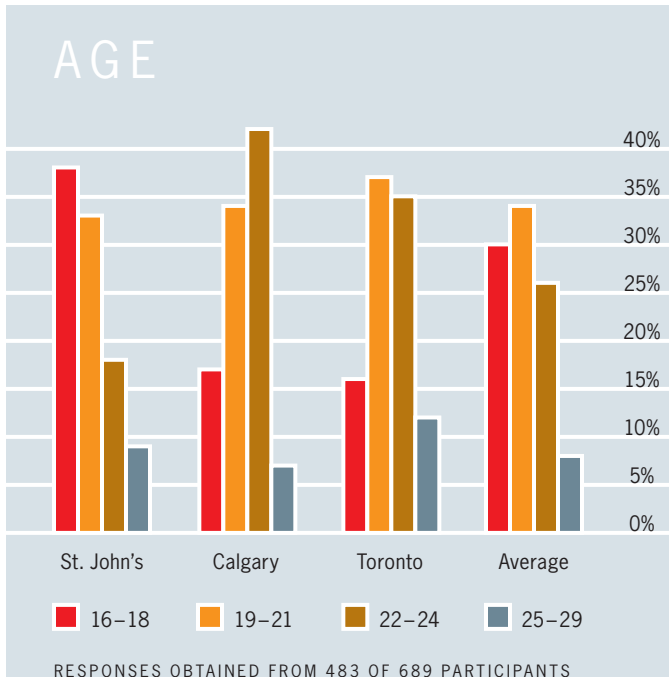
Youth homelessness refers to youth who are homeless, at-risk of homelessness or caught in a cycle of homelessness for whatever reason. This includes the many homeless youth (some say as high as 80%) who don't live on the street and who are among the hidden homeless. The age definition of youth ranges from as young as 12 to as old as 29 years old. Most often, however, youth are defined as 16 to 24 years old. They are not living with a family in a home and they are not under the care of child protection agencies. Often they are defined as living in a cycle of homelessness which can mean being temporarily sheltered or living in crowded or unsafe conditions.

Street-involved vs. at-risk: After consulting directly with youth, we learned that they preferred not to use the term "at-risk" as they felt that this description was too general, so for the purpose of this paper we have used the term "street-involved youth" to encompass the above definition.

Among the street-involved youth interviewed by *Youthworks*, the following key themes emerged *(Note: Some stats may be skewed due to a) the youth self-reporting, and b) the fact that this research study captures a cross-section of youth from three cities):*

STABILITY:

- 67% were participating in street culture
- 63% grew up in a family that found it hard to maintain housing
- 50% reported that they were having difficulty maintaining consistent housing themselves
- 52% reported housing was a barrier that they wanted to address
- 43% had previous involvement with Child Protection Services
- 68% had come from foster care, group homes or a youth centre

OPPORTUNITY:

- 62% had dropped out of school, reflecting the lack of support and resources to help street-involved youth to stay in school
- 28% reported that educational supports were a barrier they wanted to address
- 73% were not currently employed
- 44% reported that employment issues were a barrier they wanted to address

- 22% said they did not have a positive role model in their life

- 42% described growing up in a chaotic home environment

- 24% had experienced some form of sexual, physical or emotional abuse

- 20% reported a history of offending in their families

- 37% said that they witnessed substance abuse in their families

- 41% reported that substance abuse was a barrier that they faced and wanted to address

- 35% identified their lack of essential life skills as a barrier that they would like to address

- 71% had previous criminal justice system involvement

- 21% had children or were pregnant or with a partner who was pregnant

A complete *Youthworks* data summary is attached as Appendix 2.

Note: The *Youthworks* research did not ask respondents to self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/transexual or queer (LGBTQ). Subsequent commentary pointed to an increasing body of evidence indicating that LGBTQ youth are dis-proportionately represented among homeless and street-involved populations, and that they face greater odds of experiencing violence and exploitation, health challenges, precarious housing and hunger.

2. How many?

The latest federal estimate conservatively places the number of homeless individuals in Canada at about 150,000.[1] Some non-governmental sources estimate Canada's true homeless population, not just those living in emergency shelters, to be between 200,000 and 300,000.[2] It is estimated that roughly 65,000 young people are homeless or living in homeless shelters throughout the country at some time during the year.[3]

3. What's it like to be a homeless youth?

An agency in Hamilton asked some youth in a breakfast program to write a description of being homeless. Words included *"lonely," "terrified," "unloved," "always afraid," "miss what I had," "no hope," "expect the worst."*

In the final report of *Beyond the Street* – the first national youth homelessness conference, held in St. John's, NL in 2006 – the situation of homeless youth was described as follows:

"The vast majority of homeless youth have not completed high school which limits opportunities to secure training and employment as well as accessible, affordable and suitable housing. Many have experienced physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, violence and substance abuse, mental illness and family instability. Homeless youth are more likely to get sick and die on the streets. They often perceive violence as a means of resolving conflict, threatening harm to themselves and others, and leading to involvement with the justice system. Aboriginal youth are over-represented in the homeless population in some parts of Canada. The longer youth remain homeless, the worse their health and life chances become."

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1 "**A Snapshot of Homelessness in Canada**," National Homelessness Initiative, 2006 www.homelessness.gc.ca cited in Gordon Laird, Shelter, Homelessness in a Growth Economy, Canada's 21st Century Paradox, A Report for the Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership, 2007

2 "**Homelessness**", *The Globe and Mail*, June 12, 2006; National Housing and Homeless Network in Laird, op.cit., page 4.

3 **CBC: The Fifth Estate – No Way Home** – March 10, 2004

Experience differs from that of homeless adults: Street-involved youth have a different experience of homelessness than do adults. They are more vulnerable to exploitation from adults and from their peers. They need to be able to experiment with opportunities and to be able to fail and try again in a supportive environment without life-altering consequences. They are, after all, youth.

Like youth anywhere, anxiety is fairly often reported as a debilitating condition. Living on the street is very stressful. Many service providers reported that street-involved youth have often left home lives that are more unstable and complicated than the street, which is in itself an incredibly unstable and complicated environment.

Youth are incredibly resilient. They survive on the streets through very creative means. They build street families, develop street money-making economies, street housing and street routines, all while being marginalized, harassed and excluded.

Mental health issues figure prominently: Although a very low percentage of the youth interviewed for the *Youthworks* research self-identified as facing mental health concerns, other studies have found that 33% or more of street-involved young people suffer from Major Depressive Disorder or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and they also have very high rates of suicide. Anger, lack of self esteem and difficulty saying "no" to peer group pressure often defines the identity of many young people. The consequences, however, are much more severe in the context of street life, poverty and the criminal justice system.

Legal issues: Close to 30% of youth respondents reported legal issues as a barrier to achieving their goals. The difficult circumstances of street life often lead homeless youth to get involved in high-risk activities such as sexual exploitation, drug dealing and 'squeegeeing' as a way to access income. Also, youth often get tickets for panhandling, failing to pay fares on public transit, loitering and other misdemeanours. Criminalizing youth rather than treating these issues from a social perspective only adds to the already difficult challenges that street-involved youth face.

The role of addictions: More than 50% of the youth reported drug and alcohol abuse and described addiction as a major factor in coping with homelessness as well as in triggering relapses to street life. Many youth self-medicate as a tool for survival in situations where, for example, they might need to stay awake all night to avoid being exploited. Drugs and alcohol are often used as a substitute for expensive mental health medications. And these youth often don't have sufficient identification to get the medication they need or they have not yet been formally diagnosed.

Street culture: Close to 70% of respondents reported that they were participating in "street culture". This commonly lasts for an extended period, often two to four years. One youth reported that he had become so entrenched in the street culture that it was hard for him to learn mainstream norms. Another said that he was easily influenced by peers and was often taken advantage of. Yet another reported that she found it hard to say "no" to peers – not just to partying or reverting to street culture – but also to requests for money. This was a particular problem when she was trying to save for rent. One youth commented that she has never really had a positive role model or developed healthy coping skills. She struggles with issues related to her drug use and other lifestyle issues such as violence and crime.

In general, youth reported a broad and complex array of issues encompassing violence and abuse; a lack of motivation to deal with financial issues; educational support needs or employment issues; the need for medical attention; help to deal with family-related issues; support to address substance abuse; lack of essential life skills; and lack of a positive role model.

WHY WE NEED TO SOLVE YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

The broad and complex issue of youth homelessness occupies a place scattered with some of the most persistent problems on Canada's policy landscape. Addiction, homelessness, income inequality, unemployment, malnutrition, mental health issues, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, youth violence, early school leaving and teen pregnancy are just some of the complex issues faced by homeless youth.

The social and economic cost: Without a national commitment to address youth homelessness, the numbers of street-involved youth will continue to accelerate, and associated health care, criminal justice, social services and emergency shelter costs will continue to grow.

And that makes no economic sense. It costs an estimated $30,000 – $40,000 per year to keep a youth in the shelter system. The cost of keeping one youth in detention is estimated at over $250 a day, or $100,000 a year. Canada's adult homeless population – estimated by government to be 150,000 and by non-governmental agencies to be as high as 300,000 – costs taxpayers between $4.5 and $6 billion annually.[4]

STREET CULTURE

LENGTH OF PARTICIPATION IN STREET CULTURE
OVERALL AVERAGE

- Less than 3 months
- 3 – 6 months
- 6 months – 1 year
- 1 – 2 years
- 2 – 3 years
- 3 – 4 years
- 4 – 5 years
- More than 5 years

RESPONSES OBTAINED FROM 338 OF 689 PARTICIPANTS

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4   **Homelessness in a growth economy:** Canada's 21st century paradox

Prevention and supports are key: Youth who are left unsupported – lacking role models, employment opportunities, educational options, access to safe, affordable housing and, all too often, in poor health and suffering from a crippling lack of self-esteem – frequently become a cost to society. Providing support now could prevent these young people from becoming homeless adults and sinking permanently into a costly cycle of homelessness and dependence on the state.

There are moments in the life of every street-involved youth when she or he faces a fork in the road. Down one path lie opportunities for education, a job, a secure home and an independent life. Down the other path lies a life of potential instability and poverty.

HOUSING HISTORY

■ Inconsistent family housing	■ Foster care placements
■ Difficulty maintaining housing	■ Group home placements
■ Youth centre	

RESPONSES OBTAINED FROM 348 OF 689 PARTICIPANTS
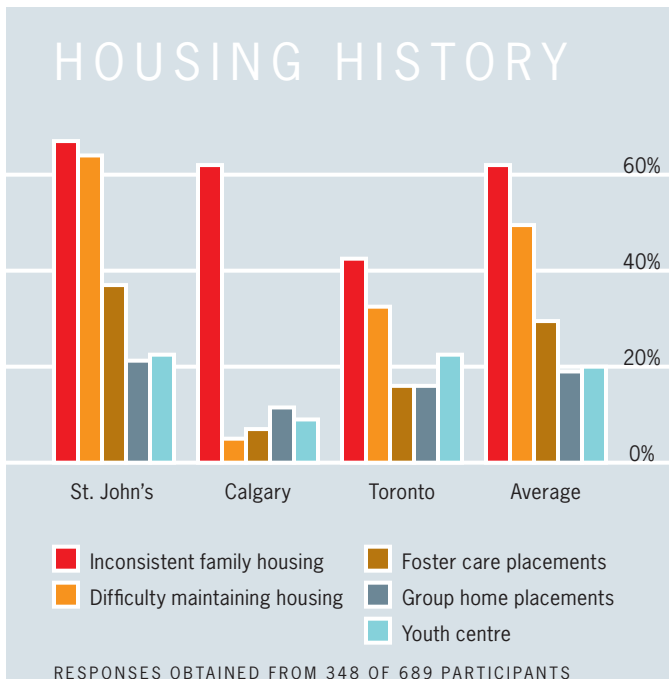
Research has demonstrated that the key to helping youth move toward the path of opportunity frequently requires appropriate interventions at the "critical moments" in a young person's life.

We know what is needed to successfully guide youth along the path to opportunity and independence. The question is: Are we committing adequate resources to be there at those moments when street-involved youth need and seek the help they require?

Sound argument for investing in street-involved youth: There is little comprehensive numerical data outlining the cost/benefit analysis of supporting homeless and street-involved youth, but we know that a sound argument can be made for the programs that provide stability, opportunity and support. These programs have been proven to help youth overcome the negative effects of being homeless and to support them in building a better future.

Investing strategically in street-involved youth – by providing critical educational and employment training and opportunities, access to stable, secure housing and by helping them to develop essential life skills – launches them on a positive path towards independence and self-sufficiency as contributing members of society. This kind of investment in youth makes sound economic and social sense.

THE ROAD TO SOLUTIONS

A successful plan to solve youth homelessness would comprise three essential components, strategically coordinated and delivered to address complex needs. The first – **prevention** – addresses the key triggers of youth homelessness. The second – **emergency response** – including youth shelters, access and outreach programs – seeks to address the immediate needs of homeless youth and stabilize their situation so that they can be supported. The third – **transitions out of homelessness** – is anchored in affordable, supportive accommodation and an array of supports. A successful plan would also include a system of evaluation that links resources to outcomes.

1. PREVENTION

Prevention is the key to solving youth homelessness. Studies in the United Kingdom[5], United States[6], and Australia[7] have drawn a similar conclusion. In Canada, the federal government has responded with investments in homeless shelters and other short-term, crisis-based services. However, there is a growing recognition that solutions need to be sustained, permanent and better coordinated among the various stakeholders. For this reason many groups have called on the federal government to make permanent the existing federal housing and homelessness programs as a starting point in addressing youth homelessness.

Public education is an important foundation to prevention strategies. An effective public education program would help to dispel myths and stereotypes about street-involved youth. It would also serve to help Canadians understand the issue of youth homelessness within the broader context of family distress, abuse, neglect, violence, child welfare, justice and education failures.

Prevention addresses the key triggers of youth homelessness, which are tied to **family-related issues** and **systems reform**.

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5   **Youth Homelessness in the UK – A decade of Progress?** Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Deborah Quilgars, Sarah Johnsen and Nicholas Pleace, 2007

6   National Alliance to End Homelessness, **Fundamental Issues to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness**, *Youth Homelessness Series Brief No. 1 – May 2006*

7   **Australia's Homeless Youth**, *A Report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness*, National Youth Commission, 2008

A. Family-related issues

In the majority of cases, youth homelessness is triggered by family-related issues ranging from poverty, sexual and gender identity, to violence and physical, psychological and sexual abuse. Youth either run away or are kicked out of their homes. Unstable housing situations were frequently reported as a trigger for youth homelessness. 63% of the young people interviewed said they'd grown up in a family that had inconsistent housing and 50% said their family had difficulty maintaining housing. Close to 30% reported low income as a factor in their family's situation. Mental health issues and addiction in the family also figure prominently in the experience of many youth.

In a recently released study, Jeff Karabanow, a professor at Dalhousie University, stated that "family life prior to street entrance was characterized by physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse; violence and substance abuse within the home; and family instability, including numerous transitions and moves (i.e., divorce, separation, introduction of step-parents and step-children, moving residences, changing cities and shifting living arrangements)."[8]

Leading Canadian homelessness researchers also report that issues faced by LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/transexual or queer) youth, due to societal stigma, are a major contributor to youth homelessness.

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8   **Getting off the Street:** Exploring Strategies Used by Canadian Youth to Exit Street Life, July 2005, Dr. Jeff Karabinow

B. Systems reform

According to the National Youth in Care Network, there are over 75,000 children and youth in care in Canada on any given day. This number represents a 67% increase over the 1995 estimate of 45,000. An additional 24,000 youth reside in detention centres and youth justice facilities. Countless more are in mental health institutions. And thousands of youth have fallen through the cracks in the system and are living on the streets and in shelters.[9] This latter group likely includes youth who, for one reason or another, were not brought into the care of child welfare authorities, ran away from their foster homes, refused to be involved in the care system or were found ineligible for services.
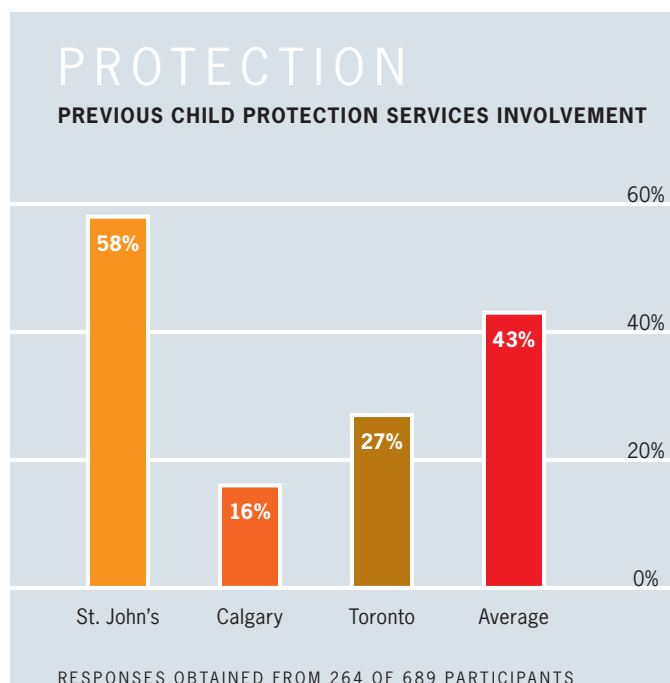
There is a need to reduce barriers to service access and to make improvements to the systems currently in place to prevent these youth from ending up homeless.

I) CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES

Of the close to 700 youth interviewed as part of the **Youthworks** initiative, 68% of respondents had previously been in foster care, in group home placements or in youth centres. 43% had been involved with Child Protection Services. Each year hundreds of youth "age out" of the child protection services system and find themselves without the support or the resources needed to cope on their own.

Of note, there are no national standards of care for children involved in the various provincial child welfare systems. While child welfare and child protection are issues of national concern, the policies and procedures related to child welfare and protection are under the jurisdiction of each province or territory. The terminology, age limits, services and policies vary across the country, causing a great deal of difficulty in providing consistent care for youth, and creating havoc in the lives of those who move from one province to another.[10]

There is a need to put procedures in place to ensure that, when youth move from one province to another, there is no negative impact and that services and supports are more portable. Provinces need to adhere to provincial legislation and obligations that support these youth and that help ensure effective discharge planning and movement between provinces. There are very practical solutions that could be implemented, such as allowing youth to stay in care longer (i.e. until age 21); increasing allowances when they are transitioning out of care to ensure they don't end up living in poverty; and offering more educational supports and life skills coaching to help them prepare for independence.

PROTECTION
PREVIOUS CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES INVOLVEMENT

St. John's	Calgary	Toronto	Average
58%	16%	27%	43%

RESPONSES OBTAINED FROM 264 OF 689 PARTICIPANTS

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9   **Enhancing Academic Success of Youth in Care** – a Research Brief. Lynda Manser, National Youth in Care Network, 2001.

10 **Creating Positive School Experiences for Youth in Care**, National Youth in Care Network. 2001.

EDUCATION

DROPPED OUT

St. John's	66%
Calgary	57%
Toronto	57%
Average	62%

RESPONSES OBTAINED FROM 324 OF 689 PARTICIPANTS
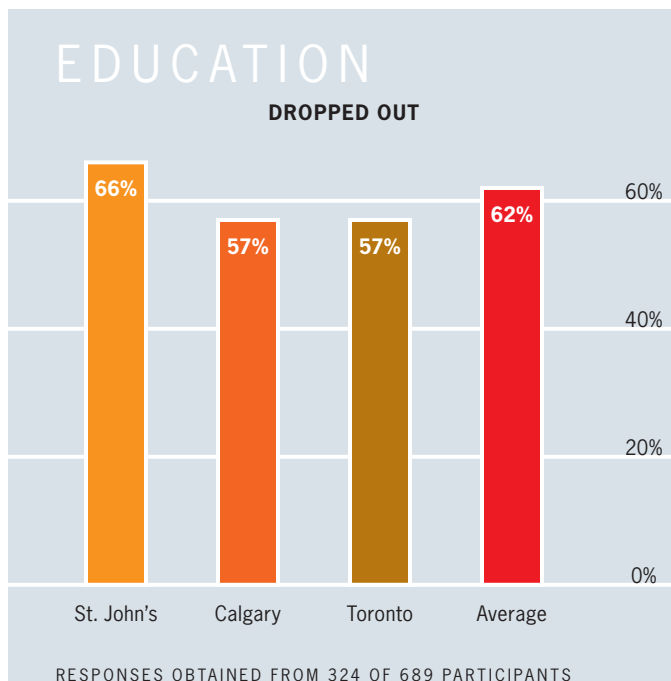
II) EDUCATION

Programs that target potential early leavers from the education system and support them to stay in school would be beneficial. Often the educational experiences of homeless and street-involved youth are such that they cannot or will not engage in "traditional" approaches to education and literacy. Overall, 62% of *Youthworks* respondents indicated that they had dropped out of high school. This figure was consistently high across the country, with 66% reported in St. John's and 57% reported in Toronto and Calgary. Some youth indicated that they would like to complete high school but have often had to leave school to look for work. In subsequent interviews most youth recognized that their lack of education was a major barrier to employment.

III) JUSTICE SYSTEM

Further data collected through the *Youthworks* initiative indicated that 71% of the youth respondents had previous contact with the criminal justice system. While some may view such a statistic as merely being indicative of the troubled backgrounds and personal deficiencies of these youth (e.g., alcohol and drug abuse), a research study carried out for the *John Howard Society of Ontario* by two members of the *Youthworks* Board of Advisors, Stephen Gaetz and Bill O'Grady, suggests that the reasons for this involvement are very much linked to the experiences associated with being homeless and insufficient prison discharge planning.

In a study that interviewed prison discharge planners, inmates and those recently released from prison, Gaetz and O'Grady showed that the relationship between homelessness and incarceration is in fact bi-directional. That is, people who are homeless are at risk of ending up in prison, and the prison experience itself places many releasees in jeopardy of becoming homeless. Because homeless youth often find themselves living in neighbourhoods which are subject to elevated levels of police surveillance, as a group, they are over-represented in the court and correctional systems.

Gaetz and O'Grady's analysis of the discharge planning process found that housing status after release from jail was associated with a number of post-release conditions. For instance, stable housing was positively associated with employment, ability to access government benefits, mental and physical health, and familial support. Those discharged without a housing plan had to live in emergency homeless shelters or on the streets and often resorted to panhandling, 'squeegeeing' or selling drugs in order to make money. Needless to say, living in this type of an environment increases the odds of ending up in jail yet again. Their research clearly showed that the way in which inmates are prepared for re-entry into the community makes a huge difference for successful re-integration.[11]

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11 **The Missing Link: Discharge Planning, Incarceration and Homelessness**. John Howard Society of Ontario. 116 pp., Stephen Gaetz and Bill O'Grady (2007)

IV) ABORIGINAL YOUTH: *FUNDAMENTAL INEQUITIES*

There are particular deficiencies within various structural systems (child protection, education and justice) that cause Aboriginal youth to be over-represented in the homeless population. According to the National Children's Alliance, 2005, Aboriginal families remain highly over-represented in Canadian child welfare caseloads. Indeed "there are more children in the child welfare system and not with their families than there were children in residential schools at their height." There is a strong link between the institutionalization of Aboriginal children and youth and the high rates of Aboriginal youth homelessness in some cities. Due to poverty and the lack of stable affordable housing options, many Aboriginal youth have been caught up in the cycles of care/custody/incarceration.

Contemporary responses, such as apprehensions and out-of-home placement, have been costly – both financially to the system and socially and emotionally to families and communities. However, apprehensions and out-of-home placements do not address the fundamental inequities that many Aboriginal families continue to experience.[12]

Aboriginal youth need intensive culturally-appropriate supports at an early stage. They also need safe and affordable housing. Systems reform is most often needed for the Aboriginal community and in the form of supported exit from foster care, group homes, support with education and/or discharge planning when leaving the justice system. This will help ensure that Aboriginal youth do not become homeless upon leaving or when released from these institutions.

A recent report, *Moving Upstream*, provides a detailed analysis of the experiences of street-involved Aboriginal youth in British Columbia. "Aboriginal youth continue to experience the legacy of colonization, and the cultural disconnection that this causes … the report clearly shows the need to ensure there are Aboriginal-specific programs and services available to children, youth and their families in their communities" said Annie Smith, Executive Director of the McCreary Centre. "Programs and services are only part of the solution," Aboriginal researcher Dana Brunanski added. "We need societal change and community-level healing, in order to create a world where more of our youth can choose a good path."

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12   **First Peoples Child & Family Review**, Vol. 3 No.2, 2007."Housing for Youth in the Inner City of Winnipeg". Jason Brown, et al.

2. EMERGENCY RESPONSE

A. Shelters

Many youth showing up through outreach are in crisis. They are focused on urgent, practical needs such as access to food, hot showers, clothing and emergency support and services. Once their basic needs have been addressed, youth are more willing to tackle other issues. Agencies report that youth are facing very complex issues: legal, addictions, mental health, history of poverty, lack of housing, lack of supports, lack of education and lack of job skills.

Although youth-specific shelters are not the answer to addressing youth homelessness, they are an essential access point where youth in need can begin to get support to become more stable. These shelters must be designed to meet the youth where they are at and ensure that there are no barriers to accessing services. The main goal is to help homeless youth get off the street and become more independent.

B. Access

Access to services: Youth who have succeeded in leaving hostile or abusive living situations are often distrustful of adults and consequently find it difficult to access services. Those under 18 do not have equal access to benefits like welfare and social housing. Youth-serving agencies reported that "many of the young people we work with do not qualify for affordable housing and therefore they have to try and have their basic needs met while paying an enormous amount of rent. Many youth live in groups (to afford the rent) and feel this is difficult because some party while some are trying to work and attend school. Often they get evicted because some pay their rent and others don't."

A focus group of 14 youth from Eva's Phoenix identified the following concerns regarding access to services:

- There is a range of available services but many youth are unaware of them – access to information should be strengthened.
- There should be more assistance to help youth attain formal identification documents.
- Youth drop-in centres should have extended hours, including weekends.
- Access to information on youth rights, e.g., while in custody, as renters, as employers and as students, needs to be more available.
- Better access to services such as family physicians, daycare services and veterinary services is important.

Access to services is often difficult or even denied to our most vulnerable young people. Many street-involved youth have their identification stolen and are not able to replace it. Consequently, they are unable to access health care, shelter, food banks, etc. Homeless youth under age 16 will often not access any services because they fear that the police and child protection services will be called. Furthermore, some young people who end up in the shelter systems are fleeing their home country and waiting to get their refugee status. Again, youth who lack status/appropriate documentation cannot access resources and are extremely vulnerable.

Access to food: this was identified as another barrier by over 50% of the youth interviewed through the *Youthworks* initiative. This finding is consistent with other research, including an earlier, in-depth examination of the diets of homeless youth in Toronto.[13] This study found that the food intake of most

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13   For review, see:
    Homeless youth in Toronto are nutritionally vulnerable. Journal of Nutrition. 135:1926 – 1933, 2005, V Tarasuk, N Dachner, J Li.
    Managing' homeless youth in Toronto: mismanaging food access and nutritional well-being. Canadian Review of Social Policy. 2006;58:43-61, S Gaetz, N Dachner, S Kirkpatrick, V Tarasuk

of the youth was insufficient to meet their basic requirements for energy and nutrients and many experienced serious levels of food deprivation. Youth who got meals and snacks from community programs appeared no better off nutritionally than those who 'foraged' for food on the street – panhandling, stealing food, obtaining food from other people, sometimes through engagement in exploitive relationships, and eating food discarded by others.

Although many agencies serving homeless youth offer meals or snacks, the limited, intermittent and uncoordinated nature of food programs for youth who are outside the shelter system renders them extremely vulnerable to food access problems. Chronically poor nutrition seriously compromises the health and well-being of the youth and compounds their struggles to exit street life.

Services in 'home' community: Although the *Youthworks* research was conducted in urban centres, we know that rural communities face similar as well as unique issues regarding youth homelessness. Lack of shelter, a safe room and other services in rural areas force many youth to move to larger cities. They often arrive in those larger cities with little or no resources, relatives or friends, making their transition out of homelessness much more difficult than if services were offered in their home towns.

C. Outreach

Outreach is both a service itself and an effective way to reach street-involved youth who are unfamiliar with services available to them or who feel they would be stigmatized by accessing them. In the hope that youth will become trusting enough to access services in the future, agencies go where the youth are and engage them on the street. Outreach workers provide non-judgmental information, support, basic needs and harm reduction, and can make referrals to assist youth. These service providers offer the 'storefront' and 'in-the-trenches' programs that build incredibly important ties with this population.

Outreach workers are also an important part of the ongoing support system that agencies use after youth have secure housing. Emotional support, life skills development, landlord/tenant advocacy and connection to a range of other services and supports are important to help youth to maintain housing.

D. Health, mental health, addictions and complex needs

Only 5% of respondents interviewed in Toronto and 1% of those interviewed in St. John's identified mental health issues as a barrier that needs to be addressed. This number is inconsistent with other studies. Reasons for this inconsistency may include discomfort in identifying mental health as an issue due to associated societal stigma and the fact that many youth are so focused on survival that they have not yet identified mental health concerns. Monica Kolstein, Coordinator, Intervention Programs at Dans La Rue, in Montréal, notes "We have noticed a marked increase in the number of youth who come to our services who have mental health issues. To this end, we have been confronted with numerous issues relating to access to mental health services appropriate for street youth." These increases in mental health issues, addictions and complex needs are a result of inadequately resourced or under-developed services. Health care agencies that have effectively redesigned services to meet the unique needs of this population and to address the social determinants of health, have greatly improved access to health services in their communities.

According to Sean Kidd, a Canadian youth homelessness researcher with the McMaster University Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences, *Youthworks* findings differ significantly from other reports of the rates and correlates of mental health concerns among homeless youth. Kidd notes that other studies have found that 33% or more of these young people suffer from Major Depressive Disorder or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, up to 10% have significant psychotic symptomatology, and multiple diagnoses are present in up to 60% of those affected with mental illness. Additionally, suicide

rates are extremely high among homeless youth with most reports indicating suicide attempt rates of 20 – 40%. Suicide has been identified as one of the top two leading causes of death for homeless youth.

Given these high figures, there is a clear disparity between the high incidence of mental health issues and the rate at which appropriate mental health services are being accessed by homeless youth. One study found that, of homeless youth with significant mental health concerns, only 9% had accessed appropriate services and treatment. Given the substantial body of research documenting the extent of mental health concerns of homeless young people across a range of settings and jurisdictions, it is likely that the findings in the *Youthworks* study are reflective of the youths' reticence to openly discuss mental health concerns, due to factors such as social stigma.[14]

E. Harm reduction

Harm reduction is a philosophy in which the main objective is to reduce risk related to various lifestyle choices (e.g., sexual practices, drug use, education and employment). Harm reduction is an approach based on working with people as they are, building on the relationship to introduce a broader range of services and using the trust built to begin a process of transformation. Many agencies have found that by incorporating this approach into all programming there is a better chance that youth can be engaged for the long-term.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

DRUG OR ALCOHOL ABUSE (SELF-DESCRIBED)

St. John's	Calgary	Toronto	Average
59%	56%	21%	53%

RESPONSES OBTAINED FROM 417 OF 689 PARTICIPANTS
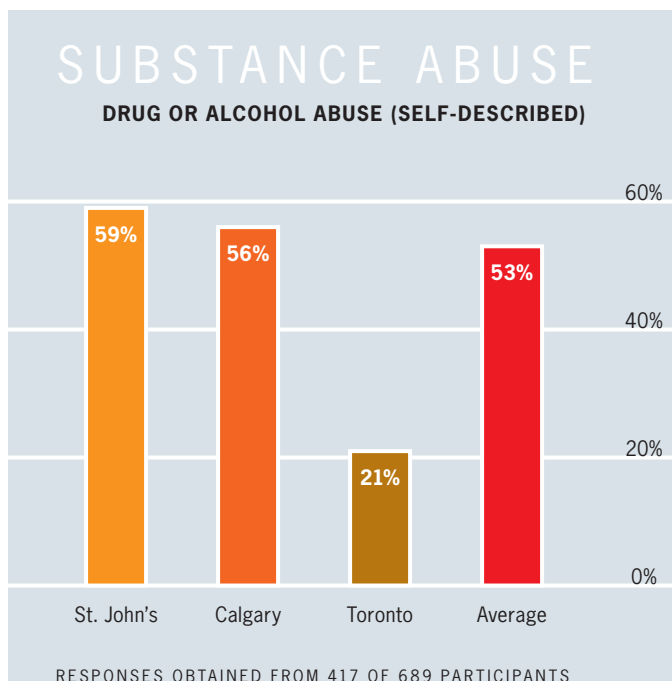
Youthworks data show 53% of the respondents reported drug or alcohol abuse. Often youth use drugs and alcohol to deal with the painful reality of being homeless and marginalized. A number of agencies have called for youth-friendly health care facilities and addiction supports that are based on a harm reduction philosophy. They also commented on the need for more harm reduction services that help support homeless youth with mental health issues, addiction issues and concurrent disorders. Once other issues are addressed, the mental health issues of youth often become more stable.

An excellent example of a service delivery approach that emphasizes harm reduction is YOUTHLINK Inner City. Their definition of harm reduction: "promotes the delivery of non-judgmental services to individuals with addictions or other health and social problems with an emphasis on reducing harm". "Other health problems", refers to sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and Hepatitis C. YOUTHLINK's priority is to give "accurate information and unbiased support to street-involved youth who engage in drug use and other high-risk behaviours so that the youth can make and carry out informed decisions. This approach seeks to maximize social and health assistance, disease prevention and education, while minimizing repressive and punitive measures."[15]

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14 For reviews see:
    Factors precipitating suicidality among homeless youth: A quantitative follow-up. Youth & Society. 37. 393-422. Cauce, A.M., Paradise, M., Ginzler, J.A., Embry, L., Morgan, C.J., Lohr, Y., & Theofelis, J. (2000). Kidd, S. A. (2006). **Dual and multiple diagnoses among substance using runaway youth**. The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse. 1.179-201. Slesnick, N., & Prestopnik, J. (2005).

15 From YOUTHLINK Inner City website http://www.youthlink.ca

3. TRANSITIONS OUT OF HOMELESSNESS

Through their direct experience working with street-involved youth, a number of agencies in Canada have developed transitional housing and support approaches that go beyond emergency response and the provision of basic needs, to break down barriers and provide solutions. Findings suggest that there are "several interrelated dimensions to the exiting process including contemplation, motivation to change, securing help, transitioning from the street, changing daily routine, and redefining one's sense of self."[16] Among a number of successful transition models in Canada, three – The Doorway in Calgary, Eva's Phoenix in Toronto, and Choices for Youth in St. John's – are profiled in Appendix 3.
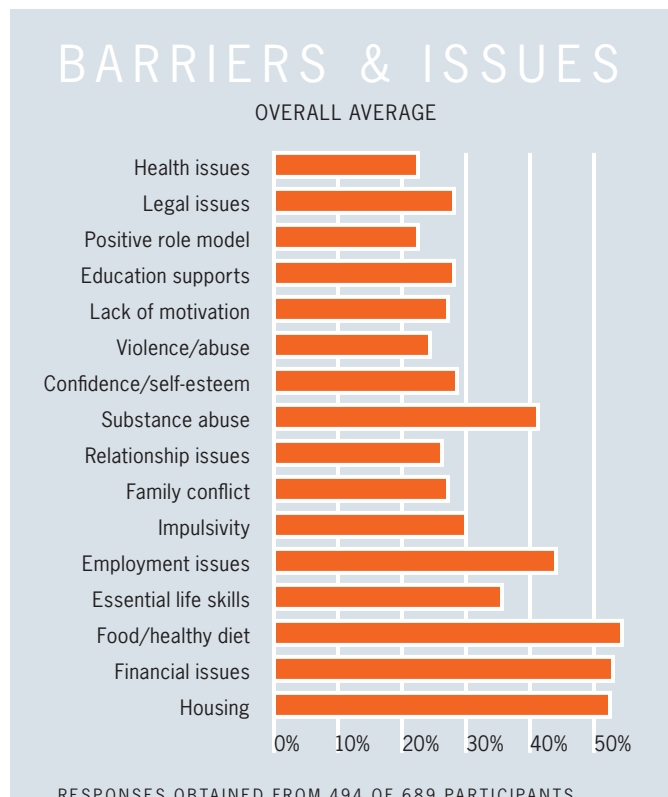
A. Housing

Transitional and supportive housing that is youth-focused is the first step in providing youth with the stability they need to access education, training, employment and other supports that enable them to eventually live independently.

However, the gains made by this approach may be lost if youth have to return to non-affordable housing once they have 'graduated'. Affordable housing is an essential component of a long-term strategy to solve youth homelessness.

The cost of housing in Canada is a major cause of poverty. Poverty is the leading cause of homelessness. Safe, secure and affordable housing is not only an essential pathway out of homelessness; it is also a key component of preventing homelessness in the first place.[17]

Miloon Kothari, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, in his keynote speech at the ***Partners Solving Youth Homelessness*** conference held in Toronto, November 2008, stressed the need for a national strategy on affordable housing with funding that is "permanent rather than year-to-year." He stated:

BARRIERS & ISSUES
OVERALL AVERAGE

Health issues
Legal issues
Positive role model
Education supports
Lack of motivation
Violence/abuse
Confidence/self-esteem
Substance abuse
Relationship issues
Family conflict
Impulsivity
Employment issues
Essential life skills
Food/healthy diet
Financial issues
Housing

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

RESPONSES OBTAINED FROM 494 OF 689 PARTICIPANTS

"It is the human right of every man, woman, youth and child to gain and sustain a secure, safe home in which they can live with peace and dignity." In his February 2009 report to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Kothari recommended that "Discriminatory practices in housing should be addressed by ensuring that victims have access to legal representation… prompt access to hearings and remedies. Systemic and widespread discrimination should be investigated by human rights commissions and legal and practical solutions implemented. Specific funding should be directed to groups particularly vulnerable to discrimination including women, Aboriginal people, the elderly, people with mental or physical disabilities, youth and migrants, to ensure they can challenge housing discrimination effectively."[18]

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16 **Getting off the *Street*:** Exploring Strategies Used by Canadian Youth to. Exit Street Life, July 2005, Dr. Jeff Karabinow.

17 According to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the cost of adequate shelter should not exceed 30% of household income. Housing which costs less than this is considered affordable.

18 "**Promotion and protection of all human rights**, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development." Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, Miloon Kothari, February, 2009

Permanent affordable housing is clearly an important component of a Canada-wide strategy to solve youth homelessness. However, it is only one element of the solution. Homeless youth also need a wide range of supports for the array of complex problems that they face.

B. Support

Once basic and immediate needs have been met (e.g., food, clothing, access to a shower and laundry facilities), longer-term, intensive models of support are required to help youth overcome complex barriers to maintain stable housing. Education, training and pre-employment support are critically important, but the *Youthworks* study found that intensive models of support were also needed across a wider range of issues – addictions, mental health and complex needs, legal issues and life skills, among others.

The Doorway, in Calgary, provides support in 13 life categories (housing, employment, education, finances, drugs/alcohol, legal, personal, problem-solving, planning, identification, volunteer, leadership and "other"). Successful program models such as this underline how essential comprehensive supports are in helping a youth to transition out of homelessness.

In reviewing the *Youthworks* research, Dr. Elizabeth M. Saewyc, Associate Professor, School of Nursing and the Division of Adolescent Medicine at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, suggests that it is important to include supportive services for homeless youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/transexual or queer (LGBTQ). These services would include LGBTQ-specific housing, as has been developed in the United Kingdom and the United States. Saewyc also suggests that agency staff represent a diversity of genders and orientations in order to provide solid role models. Even more important are strategies to: reduce sexual orientation stigma in society overall; reduce orientation harassment in school; and support families of LGBTQ youth so that they can, in turn, be an important and effective source of support.

Feedback on *Youthworks* findings from many Canadian youth-serving agencies included a call for more and improved addiction support services and mental health and concurrent disorders support. Several agencies indicated the need for more pre-employment skills training; follow-up supports for youth who are adjusting to a new way of life; family reconnection supports; and better access to youth-friendly health care. Youth-friendly responses to the complex issue of mental health and addictions were identified as a huge gap in many communities.

C. Follow-up and long-term supports

When youth start to access services and supports and begin to make some changes, one of the biggest challenges they face is developing a healthy non-street-involved network of friends. The support of and follow-up by positive role models can help youth move towards becoming self-sufficient (returning to school, starting new job training or new employment, moving into a shared apartment). Mentors can provide guidance, offer an alternative perspective, encourage confidence and provide a positive influence.

As things don't always work out – much like the experience of any young person – youth will always need to feel there is someone to turn to who will help guide them and ensure they do not return to their previous way of life.

Social Planner Jennie Vengris from the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton told *Youthworks* "one of the things that is critically needed here in Hamilton (and I'm sure we are not alone) are a few new positions – maybe in the form of outreach workers – who can follow a youth for at least the first six months after they secure housing. Simply finding an apartment for a young person is not enough. Without emotional support, life skills development, landlord/tenant advocacy and connection to a range of other services and supports, youth have difficulty maintaining housing."

D. Coordination

A number of agencies that were consulted identified the need to ensure coordination of the supports and services that need to be accessed to meet the complex needs of homeless youth. As stated earlier in this document, communities know best what works in their local areas and funders need to engage with the local community to determine how best to coordinate services and work collaboratively. The federal government can work with communities to accomplish this. Improved communication between various levels of government would help break down existing silos and increase transparency and accountability to the public.

E. Evaluation

The development of data systems and collection of data related to youth homelessness are important in creating a body of statistics and laying the groundwork for evidence-based programming. Common systems and processes would also allow agencies to develop a systematic understanding of needs, causes and effectiveness. In turn, this could help to attract stable funding, new connections and new partnerships.

As part of the work begun in 2006 at St. John's, we believe that it would be valuable to develop a common model for the complete and accurate collection of statistics from agencies involved in providing services to homeless youth across the country. The data could be used to help agencies observe trends, develop programming, evaluate services, measure outcomes and demonstrate effectiveness. Agency feedback indicates that there are existing (best practice) models that function effectively and it is important to identify the characteristics that contribute to their success, e.g., service continuum and service approach.

Eva's Initiatives' National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness is an example of a national forum that works collaboratively to share expertise in addressing the needs of street-involved youth. Launched in 2006, it is made up of 11 youth-serving organizations that are collecting current data to create further understanding of the issues in order to evaluate what is needed.

Currently, many agencies have a complex and inadequate set of funding sources (e.g., the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, HRSDC, ministries and municipalities, foundations, corporations and faith groups). It would be useful to have a common and appropriate framework to describe the many sources of funding that agencies use and the array of services required to meet the needs of homeless youth. If an agency demonstrates outcomes that are successful over several years there should be a mechanism for government funds to be secured over long periods of time versus year to year. Funders should not only focus on developing new services but also focus on enhancing existing effective, evidenced-based services. In his February 2009 report to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Miloon Kothari, The Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, urges the federal authorities to adopt an official definition of homelessness and to gather reliable statistics in order to develop a coherent and concerted approach to this issue – one that is "fully inclusive of women's, youth and children's experiences of and responses to homelessness."[19]

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19 **Promotion and protection of all human rights**, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development." Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, Miloon Kothari, February, 2009

F. Research

Evaluation is not enough. Research is also important in solving youth homelessness. Research helps us understand who the population is, how and why young people become homeless, as well as the special needs and issues of young people who are still developing physically, mentally and emotionally.

Research can contribute not only to community-based solutions, but also to policy and strategic planning. As well, it is a vehicle for helping us learn 'what works'. The importance of research is paramount. As the homelessness crisis continues to evolve, more and more people recognize the importance of research in contributing to solutions and that there is a greater demand for evidence-based decision-making and practices.

G. Community-based response

Each community has different issues and conditions and will need to develop a community-based response to youth homelessness. This will require the collaboration of service providers, policy makers, advocates, youth and community members. All orders of government (municipal, provincial, territorial and federal) will need to be engaged and integrated to deliver the resources to develop these strategies. Community-based delivery and leadership, combined with appropriate, long-term and flexible resources from all levels of government, the community and the private sector, is the model for a successful effort to solve youth homelessness. The recommendations outlined at the beginning of this document are consistent with what we have learned through the *Youthworks* initiative and will apply, in varying degrees, to communities across Canada.

H. Strategic response

Complementing the "community-based response", the strategic response occurs at a higher level and would be directed by municipalities or community advisory boards (such as through the federal government's Homelessness Partnering Strategy). The strategic response would seek to integrate services and models, and would ensure that the strategy includes prevention and transitional supports, not just emergency supports. The needs of youth are very different from those of adults and thus it is important to develop a strategy to end youth homelessness which is distinct from a more general homelessness strategy.

CONCLUSION

We have learned that the path out of homelessness is built upon a foundation of stable arrangements for affordable, supportive housing and education, training and employment. Youth caught up in the cycle of homelessness require reliable and uninterrupted provision of services to address a complex array of issues. Stability is critical if youth are to be allowed to fail, learn from their mistakes and try again.

A continuum of support services is required to engage youth and support their transition to stability. They include:

- Food, shelter and health care to meet immediate and basic needs
- Safe environment, including drop-in services and emergency shelter
- Education and job training designed specifically to meet their needs, and strategies to provide lifestyle stabilization using intensive models of support
- Social networks (trusted and supportive friends / mentors)
- Employment opportunities
- Harm reduction

If youth are to break out of street life, they require access to a range of opportunities. These include the opportunity to:

- Live in safe, secure and affordable accommodation
- Go to school, get training or a job
- Have their needs for stability and support met just like others their age
- Participate in planning their own pathways to success

We know that, with the right supports, youth can find hope for a better future. Many of the young people interviewed through *Youthworks* reported that they wanted to get into stable housing and access employment and educational opportunities. They had hopes and dreams for their lives. To move forward with program development and structured opportunities that meet their specific needs, street-involved youth require dedicated resources from all levels of government. This will require a Canada-wide commitment to address youth homelessness, not simply as a subset of housing, health or employment programs, but as a distinct and coordinated policy area supported by local community-based delivery and leadership.

With dedicated champions, partners and agencies working together with and on behalf of homeless youth, we can create the systems, supports and opportunities they need to move beyond the streets.

And we will be well on the road to solutions that address and prevent youth homelessness across Canada.

COMMUNITY CHECKLIST

This tool is designed to assess services in local communities and determine how to effectively develop and provide services that meet the specific needs of street-involved youth. The approaches used should be meaningful, appropriate and provide intensive models of support. Youth participation in program and service development is key.

1) Prevention. Prevention is the key to solving youth homelessness. *Youthworks* findings identified or reinforced the following contributing factors to youth homelessness along with needed responses:

a) Family-related issues

   i) Services and supports (e.g., crisis counseling, mentoring) to enable youth to continue to live at home by improving relationships with parents/caregivers

   ii) Appropriate supports for youth to live outside the home if the home is deemed an unsafe or unsupportive environment and/or for youth who are refugees with no family sponsors/supports

b) System reform

   i) Comprehensive, youth-focused supports for youth leaving child protection, foster care and group homes, ensuring a range of flexible housing options, such as co-op housing, transitional housing, supportive housing and independent housing

   ii) Linkage of existing strategies around poverty reduction, health care, education, welfare, justice systems and child protection

   iii) Linkage with youth-in-care campaigns to extend supports

c) Early school leaving

   i) Supportive learning environment to help keep young people in school through supportive services

   ii) Non-traditional approaches to literacy and education

   iii) Identification of learning needs

d) Outreach and engagement

   i) Access to specific services for youth to have basic needs/issues dealt with before they become entrenched in street life

   ii) Culturally appropriate services – that is, services with an anti-racist and anti-oppression framework and with staff teams that represent the diversity of the youth being served

   iii) LGBTQ-specific services (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/transexual or queer)

   iv) Transportation services to improve accessibility to services

2) Emergency Response. The basic needs of street-involved youth must be addressed before they can engage in the complex process of transitioning from the streets. Those needs include:

   a) Accessible emergency accommodation – youth-only shelters

   b) Youth-responsive health, mental health, addiction and concurrent disorder services and counseling

   c) Harm reduction services that help support homeless youth with mental health issues, addiction and concurrent disorders

   d) Emergency and transitional housing options for youth discharged from correctional facilities

3) Transitions Out of Homelessness. Transitional housing supports must go beyond emergency response and provision of basic needs.

   a) Accommodation

   i) A youth housing continuum – shelter, transitional housing, supportive housing using both public and private market housing stock, housing placement service

   b) Support

   i) Medium and longer term support for

      (1) Education

      (2) Pre-employment training

      (3) Legal

      (4) Health and mental health and complex needs

      (5) Follow-up

   c) Employment and training opportunities

   i) Comprehensive government-funded employment and training strategies, delivered by community-based organizations supporting gradual entry into the workforce

   ii) Increased support for community-based employment and training programs

   iii) Engaged private and public sector employers who create employment and training opportunities for youth

   d) Coordination and data collection

   i) Support identification of models of data collection – which contribute to understanding relevant issues

   ii) Provincially and federally coordinated funding to support community needs

   iii) Internal collaboration between government departments

   iv) Collaboration within communities with all key stakeholders

YOUTHWORKS STUDY DESCRIPTION

Goals

Youthworks was launched in January 2006. It is a national initiative aimed at breaking the cycle of homelessness among young Canadians, and supporting them to build a better future. Its goals are:

- To help homeless youth move to permanent housing and financial self-sufficiency by giving them access to education, employment and training and by building their self-esteem;

- To identify best practices to help front-line service providers deliver their programs more effectively;

- To further develop a comprehensive source of information on agencies, initiatives and resources aimed at ending youth homelessness;

- To inform and influence government policy and funding priorities that address homelessness among youth;

- To interest private sector employers in hiring previously homeless youth, to help them to develop or enhance their work skills and become independent, productive members of society;

- To encourage employers to engage their workforce in volunteer activities that support homeless youth.

Methodology

Youthworks provided three-year funding support to three agencies that serve homeless and street-involved youth – The Doorway in Calgary, Eva's Phoenix in Toronto, and Choices for Youth in St. John's. These agencies were chosen because together they offer a broad spectrum of innovative education, training, employment and housing supports – all areas within which the initiative wanted to explore assumptions about homeless youth.

Using one-on-one interviews, these three agencies followed the progress of 689 homeless and street-involved youth. The study also followed the narratives of about 100 young people to understand their experiences over the longer term. By listening to youth and their counselors, the study team hoped to better understand which supports and approaches were working and where the gaps lie.

Twenty-two youth-serving agencies across the country reviewed a summary of the *Youthworks* research data and provided feedback. While there are some regional differences, the data are consistent with what these agencies are seeing among the youth they serve. The data and observations from our youth interviews were also confirmed and supplemented through the invaluable consultation which occurred during Raising the Roof's *Partners Solving Youth Homelessness* conference held in Toronto on November 19 – 21, 2008. The 250 delegates represented previously homeless or street-involved youth, community service providers, government representatives, corporate executives and leading researchers on youth homelessness, from provinces and territories across Canada. The participants provided a wealth of input on how – as individual communities and a nation – we can bring about long-term solutions to youth homelessness.

This comprehensive research and consultation form the basis for this document, *Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions*. It will be shared with other service providers, researchers, governments and the private sector to create a broad consensus to solve youth homelessness in Canada and to promote these findings and solutions to decision-makers and funders in both the public and private sectors.

YOUTHWORKS DATA SUMMARY BY PROGRAM

Data from January 2006 – June 2008

Interviews have been conducted with 689 program participants since *Youthworks* was launched in January of 2006. Note that the numbers atop each column are a ratio of those who answered each question to the total in that program. The data therefore reflects the percent of those who answered a given question, which is not necessarily reflective of all those enrolled in a given program. Note: Some stats may be skewed due to a) the youth self-reporting and b) the fact that this research study captures a cross-section of youth from three cities.

	Program Totals	Calgary The Doorway	St. John's Choices for Youth	Toronto Eva's Phoenix
Gender	**689/689**	**105/105**	**516/516**	**68/68**
Male	60%	79%	58%	46%
Female	40%	21%	42%	54%
Age	**483/689**	**103/105**	**312/516**	**68/68**
16 to 18	31%	17%	38%	16%
19 to 21	34%	34%	33%	37%
22 to 24	26%	42%	19%	35%
25 to 29	9%	7%	10%	12%
Ethnicity	**644/689**	**105/105**	**471/516**	**68/68**
Visible minority	11%	20%	3%	51%
Aboriginal	**618/689**	**103/105**	**448/516**	**67/68**
	5%	18%	2%	7%
Citizenship	**655/689**	**104/105**	**484/516**	**67/68**
Parental status	**416/689**	**85/105**	**328/516**	**67/68**
Have children; pregnant; with pregnant partner	21%	29%	18%	7%
Current living situation	**462/689**	**103/105**	**316/516**	**67/68**
Shelter	40%	44%	35%	55%
Apartment	20%	17%	18%	33%
Rooming house	18%	2%	27%	1%
Family	10%	8%	11%	10%
Absolutely homeless	12%	30%	8%	
Participating in a 'culture of the street'?	**338/689**	**105/105**	**165/516**	**68/68**
Yes	67%	100%	48%	59%
If yes, for how long?	**224/224**	**105/105**	**80/80**	**39/39**
1 to 2 years	22%	29%	16%	15%
2 to 3 years	23%	35%	11%	13%
Less than 3 months	9%	2%	23%	—
6 months to 1 year	13%	2%	23%	26%
3 to 6 months	10%	—	24%	8%
3 to 4 years	11%	20%	—	10%
More than 5 years	8%	7%	4%	23%
4 to 5 years	4%	6%	—	5%

	Totals	Calgary	St. John's	Toronto
Family Context	(350/689)	(81/105)	(203/516)	(66/68)
Disrupted connection	62%	70%	65%	42%
Chaotic home environment	42%	2%	65%	23%
Substance abuse in the family	37%	11%	51%	24%
Early family breakup	33%	7%	45%	27%
Family violence	26%	1%	39%	15%
Single parent family	29%	7%	37%	32%
Low income in the family	27%	10%	33%	29%
History of offending in the family	20%	2%	31%	9%
Consistent connection	17%	16%	14%	27%
Housing history	348/689	58/105	241/516	49/68
Inconsistent family housing situation	63%	62%	67%	45%
Difficulty maintaining housing	50%	5%	64%	33%
Foster care	29%	7%	37%	16%
Group home placements	19%	12%	22%	16%
Youth centre	20%	9%	22%	22%
Education	324/689	74/105	190/516	60/68
Dropped out	62%	57%	66%	57%
Health issues	417/689	100/105	259/516	58/68
Drug or alcohol abuse (self-described)	53%	56%	59%	21%
Employment history	381/689	104/105	218/516	59/68
Not currently employed	73%	71%	72%	80%
Previous children's aid involvement (57)	264/689	61/105	154/516	49/68
Yes	43%	16%	58%	27%
Previous criminal justice system involvement	293/689	75/105	160/516	58/68
Yes	71%	80%	75%	47%
Barriers & issues that need to be addressed	494/689	97/105	333/516	64/68
Housing	52%	86%	43%	50%
Financial issues	53%	57%	50%	64%
Food / healthy diet	54%	15%	67%	44%
Lack of essential life skills	35%	6%	47%	19%
Employment issues	44%	77%	32%	53%
Impulsivity	30%	4%	40%	17%
Family conflict	27%	16%	30%	30%
Relationship issues	26%	10%	32%	20%
Substance abuse	41%	49%	44%	16%
Lack of confidence / self-esteem	28%	14%	27%	55%
Victim of violence / abuse	24%	9%	28%	25%
Lack of motivation	27%	8%	32%	31%
Education supports	28%	31%	24%	42%
Lack of positive role model	22%	1%	30%	14%
Legal issues	28%	45%	25%	17%
Physical or emotional abuse	17%	2%	21%	22%
Health issues	22%	30%	20%	25%
Sexually exploited	11%	—	16%	6%
Suicide ideation	10%	—	14%	8%
Sexual assault / rape	5%	—	6%	6%
Sexuality / orientation	6%	1%	6%	13%
Eating disorder	1%	—	1%	5%
Mental health counseling	2%	2%	1%	5%
Parenting assistance	—	1%	4%	—

DETAILED PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

A. The Doorway – Calgary

The Doorway is a community supporting young people in their transition from street to mainstream living.

Our theory of change is that culture is the essential element of social learning: language, living skills, actions, beliefs and perspective. Moving from the street to mainstream society is cross-cultural, and that transfer of culture is a daily human learning process. Young people learn to adapt to where they are.

Participants are young people, ages 17 to 24, who have lived on the street for an average of 3 to 5 years. They come to The Doorway on their own initiative and are welcomed by community people who maintain an environment of acceptance and respect which is safe for personal starting points and nurtures trust. That safety is key to risk new choices and actions.

Movement from street to non-street is achieved through a step-by-step planning and contracting process. Self-determined monthly steps for personal change are planned and discussed with community volunteers serving as cultural interpreters of the non-street world. Each step takes the form of a contract, which fits into one of 13 life categories (housing, employment, education, finances, drugs/alcohol, legal, personal, problem-solving, planning, identification, volunteer, leadership or "other").

Individual steps follow a business-planning approach to problem solving – working toward a personal 'critical path'. The planning process encourages individual young people to examine: where they are in any area of their life; where they would like to be instead; and what plan could work toward bridging the gap between the two realities. Self-determined choices nurture accountability and improve self-esteem.

The participant receives a $15 cash incentive for each step (eight steps per month as a business handshake transaction). "Incentive" (action motivated by self-choice) is distinguished from "reward" (choice assigned by someone else). Incentives are consistent throughout society, and at The Doorway they contribute toward a legal income gap and motivate initial and ongoing participation in the 24-month step-by-step process. From a community support perspective, each $15 is an investment in the life of each young person.

The approach has worked consistently for 70% of over 900 participants since 1988 who have successfully rebuilt their survival away from the culture of the street. Indicators of success are assessed in the collaboration of individual participants, staff and volunteers:

- sustainable independence in housing and employability
- reliable problem solving skills
- stability in managing variables and challenges of life

Our capacity is a maximum of 100 – 125 young people as funds are available. New youth fill spots emptied by graduating participants at the rate of four to six each month. Staffing comprises three full-time individuals and 10 – 12 community volunteers.

The Doorway process is designed to take the individual beyond the crisis questions of poverty and homelessness. Young people teach us that getting off the street is not about changing where you sleep but changing how you think. For them, the process functions as a 'buffer zone', a safe place outside the downtown core, for creating and contracting planned steps each month, a bridge 'from where you are to where you would like to be instead', in every aspect of your life and person.

B. Eva's Phoenix – Toronto

Eva's Phoenix is a transitional housing and training facility, which formally opened in June 2000. Prior to opening, Eva's Phoenix ran its first successful employment training program funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) which supported 50 homeless and street-involved youth in life skills training and on-site employment on the Eva's Phoenix construction site, with our partners: Carpenters Local 27, Interior Systems Contractors Association Local 675, and the Painters' Union.

Eva's Phoenix provides housing for 50 youth, aged 16 to 24 years, for up to a full year, and since 2002 has also allowed up to 160 youth each year, aged 16 to 29 years, to participate in its employment and pre-apprenticeship programs. Working with business, labour and community partners, Eva's Phoenix provides homeless and street-involved youth with the opportunities needed to develop life skills, build careers and live independently.

Youth at Eva's Phoenix live in shared townhouse-style units with access to common areas. While at Eva's Phoenix, youth develop the skills to live independently through goal-setting exercises, workshops and hands-on programs that are delivered in a supportive environment.

In combination with a Mentorship Program, youth are able to build stable support networks outside the social service system. Peer mentors and one-to-one mentors provide a range of support to youth including running cooking classes, conducting leadership development activities and supporting the efforts of youth to successfully manage independent living.

Youth living at Eva's Phoenix must be involved in a training or employment program. With the help of our partner employers, Service Canada and private funders, the Youth Succeeding in Employment Program at Eva's Phoenix provides pre-employment support and work experience placements in various industries based on the career interests of the youth. Eva's Phoenix is also home to the Phoenix Print Shop, a socially and environmentally responsible printer that supports Foundations of Print, an award-winning training program for homeless youth. Over 80% of youth who complete Foundations of Print connect with full-time work and many return to school via our Scholarship Fund. While youth learn work skills, Eva's Phoenix staff provides counseling, job placement assistance, housing search support, mentorship opportunities, follow-up support and a range of other services to help youth achieve and maintain self-sufficiency.

A comprehensive evaluation of the Eva's Phoenix program was completed in 2003 and the National Initiative Program was created to assist organizations across Canada to develop integrated models of transitional housing, employment training and mentorship support based on the Eva's Phoenix program, to help homeless and street-involved youth to become self-sufficient.

An online toolkit of resources has been produced, which describes the key elements of the Eva's Phoenix program including practical tools and information for interested groups.

C. Choices for Youth – St. John's

St. John's Choices for Youth is a nonprofit, charitable, community-based agency with an 18-year history of providing housing and lifestyle development supports to youth in the St. John's Metro area. The organization was founded as a result of an identified need among youth, the community and government to have an empowerment-based program available to youth for whom 'home' is not an option.

Current Core Programs: Supportive Housing Program
The Supportive Housing Program, which utilizes an outreach model, has highlighted our efforts as an organization to continue to respond and adapt to the needs of youth. A key feature of the program is its emphasis on attaching supports to the individual, regardless of their housing status, therefore allowing those youth who struggle with housing stability to remain in the program.

Shelter for Young Men
Since opening its doors in May of 2004, this nine-bed emergency shelter has housed over 400 young men between the ages of 16 and 29. In consultation with youth and community partners, the shelter was set up following principles of harm reduction, which recognizes the complexity of the issues that contribute to the breakdown of an individual's housing situation.

Outreach and Youth Engagement Program
The Outreach and Youth Engagement Program has a vital role to play in the further development of creative opportunities and supports to youth. Since opening the Youth Services Centre in 2004, Choices and its partners have identified a significant need in the St. John's youth community for drop-in outreach and engagement supports. These supports are in the form of a range of basic personal needs (food, clothing, access to a shower and laundry facilities, referral services for addictions and other personal barriers, as well as other supports) which lead to healthier choices on the part of youth.

New Affordable Housing with Education and Employment Supports
Choices for Youth is currently in the process of developing a new housing model that will provide longer-term housing for street-involved youth in the St. John's area (based on the Eva's Phoenix model in Toronto). This project will fill a significant gap in housing in St. John's by combining safe, affordable housing with on-site support, a basic literacy and math skills program, and an employment preparation program. The aim of the project is to take a multi-faceted, holistic approach to recurring homelessness by removing lifestyle, housing, education and employment barriers. Youth will be supported in learning the skills to live independently and securing opportunities to make healthier lifestyles more sustainable.

The fundamental rationale of all of our work at Choices for Youth is one of creating trusting, healthy relationships as an initial step in supporting youth to implement healthier lifestyle choices. By the very fact that they find themselves connecting to the Youth Services Centre, the youth targeted by this initiative are readily identified as having complex barriers to stable housing. These are inclusive of mental health and addiction issues, non-existent or sporadic family relationships/supports, poverty, inadequate housing, and fragmented educational experiences.

All of these factors combine to create current life circumstances which lead youth to continue to engage in high-risk, unhealthy activities. Through this new affordable housing facility, Choices is endeavouring to meet the needs of an extremely vulnerable population of youth who require support and opportunities to make sustainable long-term changes in their lives.

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The **Youthworks** Board of Advisors provided strategic advice to the initiative.

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APPENDIX 6
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