Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions

Based on three years of research and consultation across the country, Raising the Roof has authored a significant research paper – "Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions". This brief is excerpted from that paper, a copy of which is available at www.raisingtheroof.org. The complete document includes a Community Checklist tool to aid in assessing and developing services to meet local needs.

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

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 formally assessed the problem and 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***.

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. 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 invaluable feedback from stakeholders on those findings have enabled Raising the Roof to develop a snapshot of youth homelessness in Canada today.

Who are our homeless youth?

Youth homelessness refers to youth who are homeless, at-risk of homelessness or caught in a cycle of homelessness. This includes the many homeless youth who don't live on the street and who are among the hidden homeless. The age definition of youth ranges from 12 to 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.

Among the street-involved youth interviewed by Youthworks there were some striking similarities in childhood and family experiences. Many of the common characteristics and circumstances they identified relate to inadequate **stability**, **opportunity** and **support**.

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

SUPPORT:
- 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

Youth told us that it is almost impossible to focus on other challenges when you have no home and no money. Appropriate, **stable** and affordable housing and sustainable employment are fundamental to their ability to tackle other issues.

Given the right **opportunities** and supports – such as employment and job training; help and guidance in transitioning from "street life"; and assistance in re-connecting with educational opportunities – street-involved youth have tremendous potential.

And, like all young people, homeless and at-risk youth need guidance when challenges come their way. **Support** comes up again and again as one of the most important factors in helping them to survive and succeed.

*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 disproportionately represented among homeless and street-involved populations, and that they face greater odds of experiencing violence and exploitation, health challenges, precarious housing and hunger.*

What's it like to be a homeless youth?

Experience differs from that of 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. However, they are also incredibly resilient. They survive by developing street money-making economies, street housing and street routines, all while being marginalized, harassed and excluded.

Mental health issues figure prominently: Current research 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.

Legal issues: Close to 30% of **Youthworks** respondents reported legal issues as a barrier to achieving their goals. The difficult circumstances of street life often lead to involvement 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 public transit fares, loitering and other misdemeanours. Criminalizing youth rather than treating these issues from a social perspective only adds to the challenges they face.

The role of addictions: More than 50% of **Youthworks** respondents 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. Drugs and alcohol are often used as a substitute for expensive mental health medications. And youth often have insufficient identification to get the medication they need.

Street culture: Close to 70% of **Youthworks** respondents reported that they were participating in 'street culture'. In general, youth reported a broad and complex array of problems encompassing violence and abuse; 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.

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]

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

" ... I just want to have a life, a job and be able to get myself stable. I don't want to be on the streets or anywhere else but in my own house with a different perspective on life. I want to be able to live my life to the fullest with my family."
A Youthworks participant

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.[4]

Why we need to solve youth homelessness

Without a national commitment to address youth homelessness, the numbers of street-involved youth will continue to grow, as will the associated costs of health care, criminal justice, social services and emergency shelter. 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 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.[5]

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.

Components of successful plan

A successful plan to solve youth homelessness would comprise three essential components – **prevention, emergency response** and **transitions out of homelessness.** Feedback from youth, service providers and other sector experts across Canada 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 trans-gendered young people and those with disabilities. Many youth spoke of having great difficulty in accessing the services and supports they required. There is a clear need to reduce what appears to be a multitude of barriers. A successful plan would also include a system of evaluation that links resources to outcomes.

1. Prevention

Canada's federal government has responded to the issue of homelessness with investments in 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. 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.

Prevention strategies must address the key triggers of youth homelessness which include family-related issues and systems reform. Family-related issues range from poverty, sexual and gender identity, to violence and physical, psychological and sexual abuse. 63% of the young people interviewed in the ***Youthworks*** study said they'd grown up in a family that had inconsistent 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.

"There was a time in my life where no one that passed me by would bother even to look in my direction … I have changed my life for the better and I am a new person… Now I am proud to say that I am me."

A Youthworks participant

The numbers of youth who are homeless, in care, residing in mental health facilities, or incarcerated are alarming. There is a huge need for child protection, education and justice systems, among others, to collaborate and coordinate to reduce barriers to service access and to make system improvements that will protect these youth from long-term homelessness.

There are particular system deficiencies 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. Aboriginal youth need intensive culturally-appropriate supports at an early stage. They also need safe and affordable housing.

2. Emergency Response

Shelters: Many youth showing up through outreach are in crisis. 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.

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. Lost or stolen identification is another barrier to accessing health care, shelter, food banks, etc. Youth who lack status and appropriate documentation cannot access resources and are also extremely vulnerable.

Access to food was identified as another barrier by over 50% of youth interviewed through *Youthworks*. This is consistent with other research, including an earlier, in-depth examination of the diets of homeless youth in Toronto.[6] This study found that many youth were experiencing serious levels of food deprivation.

Outreach: Outreach service providers offer the 'storefront' and 'in-the-trenches' programs that build incredibly important ties with street-involved youth. They are also an important part of the ongoing support and advocacy system that youth need after they have secured housing.

Health needs: Very few respondents identified mental health issues as a barrier. This response is inconsistent with other studies and may be partly attributed to discomfort related to societal stigma. 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%. [7]

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). Many agencies have found that this approach is more likely to engage youth for the long-term. *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.

3. Transitions out of homelessness

A number of agencies in Canada have developed transitional and supportive housing approaches that go beyond emergency response. 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."[8]

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 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. [9]

Support: Once basic and immediate needs have been met, longer-term, intensive models of support are required to help youth 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 support of a positive role model/mentor is also important to, for example, help youth develop a healthy network of friends, return to school, start new job training or new employment, or move to a shared apartment.

Evaluation: The development of data systems and collection of data related to youth homelessness are important in laying the groundwork for evidence-based programming. The data could be used to help agencies observe trends, develop programming, evaluate services, measure outcomes and demonstrate effectiveness.

Community-based response: Each community has different issues and conditions. 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. A complementary strategic response would be directed by municipalities or community advisory boards (such as through the federal government's Homelessness Partnering Strategy) and would seek to integrate services and models and ensure that the strategy includes prevention and transitional supports.

Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on the three key aspects described in this document: prevention, emergency response, and transitions out of homelessness.

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.

Conclusion

While youth homelessness in Canada is a serious and growing issue with untenable economic and social costs, there **are** solutions. What is needed is strong national leadership and a well-coordinated, appropriately resourced plan to bring about those solutions. 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.

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.*

It is our hope that *Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions* 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.

> for more information, contact
> Carolann Barr, Director of Research and Community Initiatives,
> Raising the Roof,
> at 416-489-3538 or carolann@raisingtheroof.org.

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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

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

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

6 *For review, see:*
Homeless youth in Toronto are nutritionally vulnerable. Journal of Nutrition. 135:1926 – 1933, 2005, V Tarasuk, N Dachner, J Li.

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7. 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)

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

9. 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.