

CHILDHOOD STRESS AND MOBILITY AMONG RURAL HOMELESS YOUTH

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What do you need to know?

Homeless youth in rural settings face unique circumstances including fewer housing options and services to meet their needs. They are frequently forced to leave their communities and social networks in order to receive services or find shelter. Moreover, research suggests that homelessness is often one of several traumatic experiences these young people will face in their lives. While understanding the causes of youth homelessness (such as trauma) is important, to date this increased awareness has not lead to a shift in service provision, away from emergency services alone to providing the long-term support necessary to heal from the impact of childhood trauma.

What did the researcher do?

Longitudinal research was conducted with youth experiencing homelessness in four districts of the Niagara Region. The researcher attempted to contact youth for a total of three interviews spaced on average every four months. Forty youth participated in the first interview, 30 in the second, and 15 in the third. This study utilized a mixed-method approach where both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. The quantitative data was collected through the use of surveys filled out at each meeting. The initial

questionnaire asked questions about demographics (age, gender, etc.), education, employment, income, parents' employment and income, social support, childhood stressors, current and past housing situations, services, and future dreams, while the follow-up questionnaires included a brief history of events since the last interview, current housing situation, school attendance, employment, income, social support, and connection to services. Qualitative interviews were also conducted with the youth.

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?



This chapter investigates the circumstances of youth experiencing homelessness in Niagara region. It seeks to understand the causes and impacts of homelessness, with the goal of providing information to improve policies and programs and better meet the needs of these young people. It provides an in-depth exploration of the multiple childhood stresses faced by this population (including parental conflict, physical/sexual abuse and substance abuse) as well as the movement (or mobility) of these youth.

ARTICLE SOURCE

Baker Collins, S. (2013). Childhood Stress and Mobility Among Rural Homeless Youth. In Gaetz, S., O'Grady, B., Buccieri, K., Karabanow, J., & Marsolais, A. (Eds.), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice* (53-74). Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

What did the researcher find?

This research found that, similar to other studies, youth experiencing homelessness often come from very chaotic lives characterized by family conflict, unstable housing, parental substance abuse, and high levels of mobility (frequent moves including cycling between homelessness, youth shelters, couch surfing and rental housing). The frequent stressors in the lives of these youth were present before becoming homeless and in many cases remained after they found housing. The results

demonstrate that as damaging as homelessness can be psychologically, this experience is often only one of many traumas incurred. Drawing conclusions about what causes youth homelessness and addressing emergency needs, though important, is not enough if we do not also fully understand and respond to the cumulative effects of multiple traumas. Similarly, youth who do not end up on the street, but have equally chaotic lives might not get their needs met because their concerns are not visible publicly.

“The frequent stressors in the lives of these youth were present before becoming homeless and in many cases remained after they found housing.”

What can we do with this research?

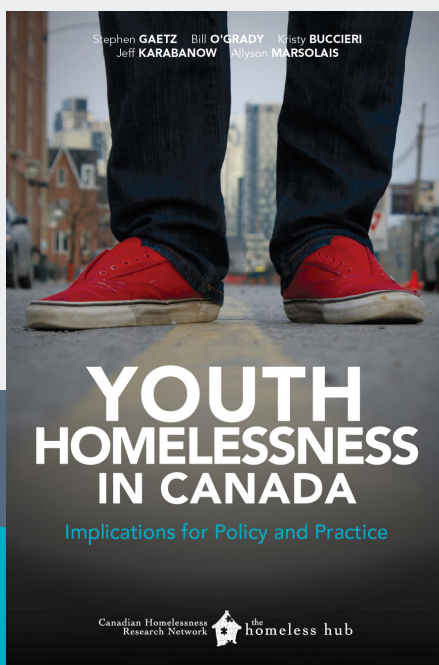
This research can be used to broaden our understanding of youth homelessness. The author recommends that rather than asking why youth become homeless, it might be more fruitful to understand all of the events that occurred during the process of becoming homeless, and how can we respond to these needs at the same time as addressing homelessness. This research can be

used to advocate for a holistic response to youth homelessness, which includes prevention, family mediation, and general counselling. Services must go beyond emergency shelter and extend to the multiple factors needed for youth to achieve stable housing, such as addressing past trauma, current strained relationships and the lack of resources youth generally have to maintain housing.

About the researcher



STEPHANIE BAKER COLLINS is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at McMaster University, where she teaches in the areas of social policy and research methods. Her research interests include poverty, homelessness, women's work in community organizations, and the impact of public policy on marginalized groups. Her most recent publication is a co-authored book (with Sheila Neysmith, Marge Reitsma-Street and Elaine Porter), entitled *Beyond Caring Labour to Provisioning Work*.



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