



Kid Builders Research Project - Phase II

**Supporting the school success of
homeless children in Scarborough**



A joint project of
Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre &
The Community Social Planning Council of Toronto

Report prepared by
The Community Social Planning Council of Toronto

March 2006



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Child and Family Centre

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Supporting the school success of homeless children in Scarborough

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Introduction.....	2
Part A – Context.....	4
I. Homelessness and poverty.....	4
II. Toronto shelters.....	11
Part B – Methodology	15
I. Participants and Data Collection	15
II. Parents	17
III. Children.....	20
IV. Shelter staff.....	21
V. Schools.....	21
Part C – Research Findings	24
I. Reasons for seeking shelter	24
II. Living in a shelter.....	24
Factors impacting levels of stress	25
Perceptions of behaviour/behavioural changes in children	27
Social relationships	29
III. School success	31
Changing schools	31
Enrolment.....	32
Attendance	33
Transportation.....	33
Homework.....	34
Academic performance	35
Social relationships	36
School supports.....	40
Barriers to school success	42
IV. Recommendations.....	43
Appendix A – Special thanks	47
References.....	49

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Introduction

The City of Toronto has experienced rising levels of poverty and homelessness. Vulnerability, marginality, and perceptions and experiences of exclusion are increasing across the city. Despite its improving economy, the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. 550,000 people and one-third of the city's children live in poverty (City of Toronto 2003; Toronto Community Foundation 2004). Toronto's child poverty rate, at 33.5%, is higher than those of the surrounding regions and all of Canada (Campaign 2000, 2003). In addition, poverty rates are greater among visible minority families with children; 38% in 2001 compared to 17% among non-visible minority families.

Homelessness, like poverty, is escalating at an alarming rate, exacerbated by an inadequate supply of social housing (Toronto Civic Panel 2004). In 2003, approximately 33,000 people stayed in Toronto's emergency shelters, a slight increase from 2002 (32,000 people). Families, rather than single individuals, have been particularly impacted by the increase. Between 1990 and 2001, two-parent families with children and couples without children were the fastest growing group of shelter users in the city (City of Toronto 2001). Despite a significant decline from 2001 to 2002, the number of two-parent families remains close to three times higher than it was in 1990, while that of one-parent families continues to rise (Gathenya et al. 2004). Primary reasons for family homelessness include poverty, inability to pay rent, family breakdown, violence against women, social isolation, substance abuse, psychiatric illness, maternal depression, and physical and sexual abuse (Coates 2001).

Between 1990 and 2001, a period of major governmental cutbacks to housing, social assistance and other vital support programs, the number of children staying in shelters grew dramatically, by 85%. One-third of these children were younger than four, and more than 50% were of school age between five and 14 years. Homeless children exhibit high rates of externalizing behavioural problems (e.g. aggression, hyperactivity and anti-social behaviour), internalizing behavioural/emotional problems (e.g. anxiety, excessive fears and depression) and developmental delays (ibid). Despite sharing many problems with other children living in poverty, homeless children face additional stresses associated with residential instability, related family disturbances and school disruptions. Whenever children move several times, the risk of emotional and behaviour problems, likelihood of being expelled from schools or being retained in the same grade for more than one year increases. Homeless children are deprived of protective factors such as friendships, successful school performance and self-esteem, and confront additional challenges such as the loss of personal possessions, friends, pets and teachers, and are faced with a lack of space for play and/or study when living at a shelter.

The underlying premise of this research is that children from homeless families have unique problems that create barriers to accessing educational and other basic services, even when such services are readily available. For the purposes of this report, children dealing with issues of homelessness include those who have spent one night or more in a shelter/motel in the previous year. This encompasses a wide demographic of children, ranging from those for whom a shelter might be a single, isolated incident in an otherwise reasonably stable situation to those confronting longer term issues of homelessness.

This report examines the educational needs of homeless school age children and the links between homelessness and school success. School success here denotes academic achievement, sense of belonging and connection at school, and social and behavioural well-being. Part A of this report opens with a short examination of homelessness in Canada and Toronto, including primary

reasons for persons seeking shelter, the impact of homelessness on children's physical, mental and emotional health and well-being, educational experiences of homeless children, resilience/coping strategies, and gaps in Canadian research. A brief description of Toronto's shelter system as well as specific information on participant shelters is provided. Part B focuses on methodology, including participants, and Part C on research findings. The report concludes with a series of recommendations directed at governments, school boards, shelters and community agencies with an aim to improve homeless children's educational experience and outcomes, and assist policy makers and implementers, parents and the community in facilitating children's access to available social services.

Part A – Context

‘There are so many paths to homelessness and we try as a society to say it’s this one issue so that we can maybe get a handle on it. But it isn’t. Everybody is so different and everybody’s got a different story’.

(Interview, Teacher)

I. Homelessness and poverty

Homelessness, like poverty, is on the rise across Canada. Yet, despite its growing prevalence, very little Canadian research on this crisis exists (Peressini and McDonald 2000). In 2001, approximately 200,000 people were estimated to be homeless nationwide (Pollack 2001). Homelessness is commonly understood to mean a condition of people who reside outdoors, stay in emergency shelters, spend the majority of their income on rent, or live in overcrowded, substandard conditions that put them at considerable risk of becoming homeless. In 1999, the federal government launched the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) in efforts to alleviate homelessness and, through the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), create a more integrated and inclusive approach for change (Government of Canada n.a.). Yet, despite these and other programs, homelessness continues to remain a critical concern across the country, particularly in Toronto, a city considered to have more homeless people than all major cities combined (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 1998; Falvo 2003).

Despite some improvement in Toronto’s economy, homelessness persists. In 2002 approximately 552,000 people lived in poverty; 32,000 stayed in the city’s emergency shelters, 4,800 of whom were children. Families and couples, rather than single individuals, have become the new faces of homelessness. Between 1990 and 2001, two-parent families and couples without children were the fastest growing group of shelter users in the city; the percentage of children jumped 130% from 1988 to 1999. The length of time spent living in shelters has also increased, with families now staying approximately four times longer than they did in the late 1980’s.

However, since 2001 the overall number of people using shelters has fallen by approximately 1,400 people. Primary reasons include more restrictive federal immigration policies that have reduced the number of refugees and other newcomers seeking temporary shelter upon their arrival in Canada (CMHC 2003); the reduction of two-parent families needing shelter; support services such as the Central Family Intake (CFI) program, which assists families in avoiding the shelter system through referrals to housing help services and eviction prevention support; and the rising rental vacancy rate, up 0.4% in 2004 (Toronto Community Foundation 2005).

Nevertheless, the inadequate supply of social housing continues to exacerbate homelessness, the most visible demonstration of the city’s housing crisis. Toronto possesses the highest rents in Canada, with a growth of 31% between 1997 and 2002. More than one-third of Toronto tenants spend over 30% of their household income on rent, while more than 25% of tenants possess annual incomes below \$20,000. In 2004, some food bank users were spending up to 75% of their income on rent.

Causes of family homelessness vary; homeless families are a diverse group. Primary reasons include the lack of affordable housing, poverty, inability to pay rent, family violence and inadequate funding for social programs. Additional causes comprise discrimination, mental health

issues, addictions, physical health problems, settlement issues surrounding migration and immigration, breakdown in family support structures, unemployment, lack of education and employment skills, as well as adverse childhood experiences such as homelessness. Much of the literature has denounced the shortage of affordable housing as the most significant cause of homelessness (Bontoft 1999).

Lack of affordable housing has a particularly detrimental impact on women fleeing situations of violence. Disturbing national statistics have demonstrated the widespread occurrence of domestic violence against women in Canada. In 1999, 23,490 cases of spousal violence against women were reported to police across Canada, with far greater numbers going unreported (Bunge and Levett 2000). In a 1993 nation-wide survey, 29% of ever married women reported having been assaulted at least once by their partners (Statistics Canada 1993). Between 1979 and 1998, 1,468 women were killed by their husbands in Canada (Statistics Canada 2000).

Spousal violence against women has damaging and long-term effects on mothers and their children. Women who have experienced violence by their intimate male partners are at an increased risk for serious mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depression (Ham-Rowbottom, Gordon, Jarvis and Novaco 2005). Health consequences associated with PTSD include flashbacks of traumatic events, anger, withdrawal, psychological distress, anxiety and depression, co-occurrence of substance use disorders, fractured relationships, reduced mobility, physical activity, social activity and quality of life (Waites 1993). Depression carries many of the same consequences including impaired physical health, difficulties accessing and maintaining employment and diminished quality of life (Gotlib and Hammen 2002). Lack of access to appropriate and accessible mental health support further hinders health and well-being.

Not surprisingly, the mental health consequences of intimate partner violence against women compromise the capacity of women to function as parents (Garber and Horowitz 2002). Coupled with homelessness and poverty, survivors of domestic violence face many challenges meeting the emotional needs of their children. Having endured the trauma of living in a violent situation and the upheaval of losing their home, children's emotional needs may be especially great.

As well as domestic violence, inability to pay rent is a serious issue affecting many Toronto families. In 2002, Toronto landlords submitted an estimated 19,300 eviction applications, an increase of 10% since the provincial Tenant Protection Act was passed in 1998 (Lapointe et al. 2004). An estimated 85% of eviction applications were filed as a result of arrears. While figures for household eviction were not available, these authors estimated that 3,900 households including 9,800 adults and children were evicted in 2002 based on the issuing of an estimated 12,300 eviction orders.

This local tenant study revealed the extent to which families with children were affected by eviction and the impact on family members. Families with children represented 48% of all households facing eviction, with lone parent families constituting the largest group. Tenants facing eviction tended to be younger, primarily from the 25-34 and 35-44 age categories. Loss of a job was the major factor resulting in people's inability to pay the rent. Stress was the most common impact on tenants facing eviction. As well, tenants experienced problems with emotional stress, anger, hopelessness and depression. Many parents reported that their children were very upset by the experience, having endured multiple losses involving their home, school, friends and sometimes, one or both parents. The housing crisis only continues to escalate.

In April 1993, the federal government announced its intention to freeze social housing expenditures to \$2 billion annually; the responsibility of housing was shifted to provinces and territories. However, increased provincial-territorial funding did not follow. Rather, the annual amount by provinces and territories spent on overall housing spending totalled an estimated 23%. As a result, only 940 new units were constructed in 2000 compared to an annual average of 20,000 between 1964 and 1993. In December 2000, the Ontario Provincial Government devolved social housing to municipalities. Toronto was particularly impacted, confronted with a growing crisis and limited funds and decision-making authority to effectively cope. Despite being a recipient of SCPI funding, Toronto witnessed dollars directed towards improving existing supports rather than construction of new units. Consequently, the waiting list for social housing grew, climbing to a high of approximately 71,000 in 2003 and falling 13% in 2004 (City of Toronto 2003; Housing Connections 2004; Toronto Community Foundation 2005).

Nevertheless, government efforts to ameliorate the housing crisis continue. In April 2005, the federal and provincial governments signed a new Canada-Ontario Affordable Housing Program Agreement, bringing the total amount committed to affordable housing in Ontario by all three levels of government to \$734 million over the duration of the program (MMAH 2005). In June 2005, an NDP amendment to the Liberal budget was passed in the House of Commons, which included a \$4.6 billion boost in social program spending over two years. Included in the budget was \$1.6 billion for affordable housing construction (CBC 2005), a large proportion of which would be directed towards Aboriginal housing on and off-reserve. However, despite receiving royal assent, the government has not yet come up with a detailed program on how to spend the money (Shapcott 2005).

The lack of affordable housing is inextricably linked to poverty and low income. Eviction and the inability to pay rent have resulted in rising levels of homelessness nationwide. Federal, provincial and municipal efforts have not sufficiently quelled the fallout from funding reductions and restructuring, including drastic changes to unemployment insurance (UI) coverage and welfare, and the ongoing clawback of the national Child Benefit supplement. In short, an increasing need for services and resources has emerged at a time of greater social cutbacks leaving the already vulnerable even more so.

Homelessness has been defined as the culmination of an extended period of crisis situations producing family mobility and stress; i.e. it is not a crisis by itself (Iowa Department of Education 1998). It has also been described as a 'revolving-door phenomenon' in which homeless people suffer from an often-inescapable cycle of poverty (NAEHEY n.a.). Poverty has increasingly impacted families and individuals across the country; 1,201,000 children (or nearly one in six), remain in poverty (Campaign 2000, 2005). It has also disproportionately impacted Toronto's immigrant, racialized and Aboriginal communities. Nationally, the child poverty rate among recent immigrants has grown every decade since the 1980's. Forty percent (40%) of off-reserve Aboriginal children live in poverty. In Toronto, immigrants comprise nearly one-half (48%) of the population and a majority (57%) of the poor; 14% of children of African, Black or Caribbean ancestries comprise 25% of poor children.

In 2001, the poverty rate for economic families in the city totalled 19.4%, unattached individuals 37.6% and populations in private households 22.6%¹. Lone parent families are at a greater risk of

¹ Statistics Canada defines an economic family as a group of two or more persons who live in the same dwelling and are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law or adoption. Populations in private households include persons or a group of persons (other than foreign residents) who occupy a private dwelling and do not have a usual place of residence elsewhere in Canada (www.statcan.ca).

poverty; their child poverty rate is 57%, the same as Canada's (57%) and higher than Ontario's (54%). Throughout the 1990's, the number of lone parent families grew by 39% in Toronto, notably among parents 30 years of age and older. These families have been disproportionately impacted by poverty; 45% of the city's low-income children live in lone parent families. The child poverty rate for two-parent families is also considerably high at 25%, higher than Canada and Ontario's rates of 17% respectively. Since 1995, the number of poor children grew at a faster rate in two parent families (16%) compared to lone parent families (12%). Nevertheless, as incomes continue to fall, lower income families have come to depend on transfer income, dollars that have been decreasing since 1995.

In 1997, 90% of homeless families in the United States were single-parent families headed by women (Yamaguchi et al. 1997). The number of lone parent, particularly mother-led, families is on the rise across Canada; they live, on average, \$9,600 below the poverty line. In addition to low income, factors such as family break-up and violence against women, including physical, sexual, emotional and financial, contribute to the rise in family homelessness (METRAC 2001). Between April 2003 and March 2004, approximately 58,000 women and 37,000 children sought refuge in 473 shelters across Canada (Statistics Canada 2005). Total annual admissions for 2003/2004 were down 7% from 2001/2002 and 11% from 1997/1998, the result of decreases in child admissions. Homelessness, both visible and hidden, affects women from all backgrounds. Immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to some key factors contributing to homelessness including poverty, barriers to economic self-sufficiency, lack of affordable, appropriate and safe housing, isolation, language barriers and family violence (Sherkin 2004). Many homeless women also suffer from drug and alcohol addiction and mental health issues. Research has shown that more homeless females than males suffer from mental health problems and have attempted suicide (CMHC 2002).

Homelessness and health are inextricably linked. Homeless people tend to be in much poorer overall health than the general population. This includes higher rates of conditions/illnesses such as arthritis/rheumatism, emphysema/chronic bronchitis, asthma, viral and bacterial infections, epilepsy, tuberculosis and HIV. Homeless people regularly endure significant rates of sexual victimization (particularly women), physical assault, police harassment, crowded housing/shelter (insufficient number of bedrooms), poor nutrition, inadequate hygiene, lack of privacy and security, forced movement and rampant theft. Pregnancy is extremely common among female homeless youth, with more and more babies being born in Toronto each year.

Homelessness has a direct impact on children's health and overall well-being (Eddowes 1993; Hart-Shegos 1999; Huang & Menke 2001; Reed-Victor & Strong 2002). Lack of a permanent dwelling deprives children of one of the most basic necessities for proper growth and development, and poses unique risks that compromise their health status. Common acute problems in homeless children include upper respiratory tract infections, skin infections, diaper rash, conjunctivitis, trauma-related injuries, developmental delays, and chronic diseases such as sinusitis, anaemia, stunted growth, asthma, lead poisoning, bowel dysfunction, eczema, and visual and neurologic deficits (Committee on Community Health Services 1996). The most prevalent nutritional problem among homeless children in the United States tends to be obesity. Since refrigeration storage and cooking facilities are not available, parents often turn to fast-food restaurants and convenience stores as the most common sources for food. This issue will be further explored in Part C of this report. Hunger is another common problem, with many homeless children lacking sufficient caloric intake.

Access to healthcare, particularly preventative, is difficult for homeless families. When parents struggle to meet their family's basic survival needs for food and shelter, healthcare by necessity

becomes a secondary concern. In addition, high levels of transience impede families from developing an ongoing relationship with a healthcare provider. In the event of an emergency situation, families will seek care in hospital emergency rooms and visit public health nurses and clinics. Continuity of care is non-existent and infrequently comprehensive; high rates of under-immunization and other unmet health needs often result (Vostanis et al. 1998).

Stressors related to homelessness increase children's risk for both physical and mental health impairment (Menke 1998). Homeless children exhibit various mental health problems including high rates of externalizing behavioural problems (e.g. aggression, hyperactivity and anti-social behaviour), internalizing behavioural/emotional problems (e.g. anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), excessive fears, depression) and developmental delays (Vostanis 2002). Other symptoms include sleep disturbance, eating problems, soiling and bed-wetting, which often accompany emotional and behavioural difficulties. Despite sharing many problems with other children living in poverty, homeless children face additional stresses associated with residential instability, related family disturbances and school disruptions.

Research has revealed that adequate, stable housing in safe, supportive neighbourhoods and communities is directly linked to positive childhood outcomes in the areas of health, development and well-being (Cooper 2004). For instance, children who live in dwellings with no problems such as overcrowding and/or housing disrepair are less likely to have delayed motor, social development and receptive language skills than children with one exposure to dwelling problems (Jackson and Roberts 2001). Other studies highlight the primary difference between homeless and low-income housed families as lying in the issues and experiences of the parents (Coates 2001). Homeless parents are more likely than those in comparison low-income samples to have experienced drug and alcohol abuse and less likely to have a supportive social network. Anooshian (2003) contends that children's feelings of loneliness, preferences for being alone, and peer victimization are directly correlated to intellectual development, particularly for those with more extensive experiences with homelessness. In addition, a high proportion of homeless women with young children suffer from psychiatric disorders, notably depression, and disruptive patterns of mother-child interaction; this leads to adjustment difficulties and serious developmental, emotional and learning problems (Holloway 2003).

According to some American studies, the majority of homeless children are behind academically, often the result of missing school and/or frequently moving (Nabors & Weist 2002). Changing schools causes delays and interruptions in a child's learning, require adjusting to a new environment, and developing new friendships. In the United States, at least 43% of homeless children do not attend school regularly and approximately 50% have failed at least one grade (Hicks-Coolick 2003). According to Hart-Shegos, homeless children's academic performance is hampered by their poor cognitive development and situation of their homelessness. Homeless children experience developmental delays that impede academic success at four times the rate of other children, and endure emotional and behaviour problems that affect learning at approximately three times the rate of housed children. Homeless children also experience twice the incidence of learning disabilities, including speech delays and dyslexia, than other children. They are subjected to pronounced and prolonged stress, often related to the loss of things that facilitate social acceptance as well as homelessness itself, which increases personal shame and compromises self-esteem.

Homeless children also endure poor physical and/or emotional health as well as inadequate nutrition. According to Smith (2003), health is a silent partner to education. In order to learn, children need to be healthy. Moreover, the relationship between health and education is reciprocal. Good health facilitates learning and well-educated children tend to be healthier.

Educational achievement has been shown to contribute more to health than any other long-term intervention. All of these factors, combined with lower teacher expectations, poor school readiness skills, and strict and inconsistent parenting, work together to negatively impact homeless children's cognitive and intellectual development.

Frequent moves are extremely detrimental to children's academic and social progress:

'Every time a child has to change schools, his or her education is disrupted. According to some estimates, 3 – 6 months of education are lost with every move. High mobility among homeless families means that homeless children and youth are at risk for falling behind²'.

Mobility deprives children of protective factors such as sustainable friendships, continuity of routines, successful school performance and self-esteem. In the United States, 41% of homeless children attend two different schools in one year and 28% three or more. A length-of-stay restriction in shelters, short stays with friends/relatives, and/or relocation to seek employment make it difficult for homeless children to attend school regularly (NCH 2001). In addition, breaking shelter rules, visiting an absent parent and attending appointments lead to high levels of absenteeism and lateness. Delays in transfer of school records often result in inadequate classroom placement and inability to secure vital supports. Transportation is an additional challenge, as homeless families tend to have neither a family car nor money for transit fare. Many shelters are unable to cover full transit costs, but rather provide a partial subsidy. Frequent mobility results in children's poor performance and increased behavioural and emotional problems including anxiety, depression, peer conflicts, lower ratings of psychosocial development, difficulties in developing and maintaining peer relationships, perceptions of social rejection, non-attendance and lateness.

The absence of a quiet environment in which to do homework and a lack of schoolbooks, computers, basic supplies and remedial assistance further impedes academic progress. Despite participating in shelter-based homework clubs, homeless students are in need of extra one-on-one support that is often difficult to achieve in a program with numerous children and limited staff. However, in spite of these challenges, homeless children enjoy going to school and yearn to succeed (Biggar 2001). According to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHEY), school can be a place of safety and consistency in an otherwise turbulent and unpredictable life; i.e. '...a haven, a place free of the chaos and fear that may define [the children's] lives' (National Association of Elementary School Principals 2002).

Unfortunately, as with physical and mental health care, greater needs do not necessarily translate into greater access to special services and other community agencies. Homeless children are more likely to be out of school, retain a degree of anonymity to avoid being traced by a violent parent, and/or unable to obtain outside support due to the distance from the shelter. Consequently, children miss out on their only source of social stability, viz. their peers, routines, sense of achievement and self-esteem, all of which are vital protective factors.

Resilience or protective factors may be described as individual cognitive capacities; styles of acting rather than reacting; self-esteem; self-efficacy and problem-solving skills; reasonable persistence; positive experiences of secure relationships and success; easy-going temperament;

² The 1999 Reauthorization of the McKinney Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program Points for Consideration, 1999, cited in *Chicago Public Schools. Homeless Education Program. Policy and Other Important Documents.*

qualities which engender a positive response from others; and competency through having overcome stress successfully. Resilient children may be defined as those who will remain competent despite exposure to misfortune or stressful events. Vulnerability begins to significantly increase when children experience two or more risk factors (Gordon Rouse, K., et al. 1985; Novick 1998). However, research has shown that not all children exposed to risk factors will develop mental health problems. Despite the fact that homelessness tends to disrupt relationships and supportive networks, thus weakening these protective factors, the concept of children being able to cope with adversity has immense implications for intervention programs with homeless children (Coates 2001; Vostanis & Cumella 1999).

Homelessness and poverty continue to impact adults and children nationwide, affecting those in both urban and rural communities. 1.7 million Canadians are in 'core housing need', falling below the standards set by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) for adequacy, suitability and affordability (Cooper 2004, pg. 90). In addition, housing has never been a central feature of children's policy initiatives, nor have the interests of children been well reflected in Canadian housing policy. Virtually no Canadian research exists that specifically examines homelessness and its link to education; research is primarily American-based. According to Bontoft (1999, pg. 14), 'academic issues of children who are homeless have traditionally been ignored by researchers studying the effects of homelessness on the family unit'. This gap has even been the subject of recommendations for change:

'Additional research [should] be conducted focusing on the educational needs of homeless children, and the links between homelessness and school performance. Such a study should use a more qualitative approach that involves children, parents, service providers and educators'.

(Gathenya 2004, pg. 21)

Further Canadian research is vital to generate greater awareness among teachers and school boards on the unique circumstances affecting homeless children with an aim to improve their educational experience and outcomes, and assist policy makers and implementers, parents and the community in facilitating children's access to available social services.

II. Toronto shelters

Toronto has numerous family shelters scattered throughout the city. As of April 2005, Toronto had a total of 2,605 units³ and 4,628 beds⁴. Council has recently approved funding for three additional shelters and 270 beds (City of Toronto 2005). The majority of these shelters are concentrated in the eastern portion of the city, specifically in East Toronto, East York and Scarborough.

Toronto shelters offer residents a Personal Needs Allowance (PNA) of \$112.00 per month or \$3.75 per day (PPAO 2001). As of December 1st 2005, the amount of PNA will increase five cents per day, totalling \$3.80 or \$114.00 per month. The objective of the PNA is to ensure that individuals living in shelters, provincial psychiatric or long-term care facilities, hostels, and other specific types of housing meet their incidental costs other than those provided by the facility. These costs may include clothing, shoes, transit, hair cuts, hygiene products, nutritional supplements and other items related to basic comfort and quality of life. Regarding shelter residents and eligibility, adults (couples and individuals) and children are eligible to receive PNA as long as they occupy a bed⁵.

Data for the present study was collected from five existing family shelters in the former municipality of Scarborough. They include: Red Door Family Shelter, Emily Stowe Shelter for Women, Julliette's Place, Birkdale Residence and Family Residence. Shelters were chosen based on their collaborative relationship with Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre (ADCFC). The participation of shelter staff and adult and child residents was voluntary.

Red Door Family Shelter⁶ is a not-for-profit, community-based agency that offers safe and supportive emergency housing to persons and families fleeing domestic violence and those without accommodation. Red Door receives approximately 80% of its funding from the City of Toronto – Hostel Services Unit (Shelter, Support and Housing Administration) and the remainder through fundraising and donations. The Scarborough-based participant site, one of three others across Toronto, has twenty rooms accommodating an estimated eighty people. The average stay ranges between two and three months in duration. Red Door provides a communal living environment. Medium to large-size families are assigned their own room, while smaller ones often share. Bathrooms and the dining hall are public spaces. A cook prepares three meals a day. Core programming focuses on self-esteem, conflict resolution and social skills. Services provided include crisis counselling, legal and immigration support, medical assistance, ESL classes, childcare programs including pre-school, school age⁷ and homework programs, housing referrals and partnerships with various external agencies.

Unlike other participant shelters, Red Door has a *Shelter- School Liaison Worker* who serves as a consistent source of support for children and parents, linking them and the shelter directly to the neighbouring school. Some duties include, among others, registering children for school; walking them to and from school in the morning, noon, and afternoon; providing emotional, social and

³ This included 648 completed units and 1,957 underway (City of Toronto 2005).

⁴ This comprised 4,235 existing, 153 motel and 240 new beds (ibid).

⁵ (Telephone conversations (24 and 28 November 2005), Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, City of Toronto).

⁶ Data was collected from a staff focus group discussion on 2 May 2005, an interview with the Shelter School Liaison Worker on 20 May 2005 and the website www.opendoorfestival.com/shelter.html.

⁷ Due to lack of funding, a teen program, once provided, is no longer offered.

academic support to students during school hours; meeting with parents weekly and teachers regularly to monitor children's progress; setting up parent-teacher appointments; advocating on a child's behalf for needed services; sitting on the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) support team meetings regarding shelter students; and liaising with school staff regarding issues confronting children at the shelter.

Red Door, like some of the other shelters, also has an *Outreach/Follow-up Worker* who helps people with their transition from homelessness to independent living by assisting them to adjust to and maintain their new housing. The Outreach Worker strives to ensure that supports are in place for safety and assistance. Some responsibilities include forging relationships with residents while they are still in the shelter; visiting families shortly after their departure; locating grocery stores, schools, banks and other significant venues in their new area, and introducing them to neighbourhood agencies and community supports; providing escorts when needed to legal aid, immigration and health appointments among others; and advocating for clients. It is important to note that this service is primarily directed towards adults rather than children.

Emily Stowe Shelter for Women⁸ is a non-profit organization that provides emergency housing, support services and referrals to assaulted women and their children. Emily Stowe receives approximately 70% of its program funding from the Ministry of Community and Social Services and 30% from fundraising efforts and donations. Reopening in December 2004 following extensive renovations, Emily Stowe is now a 30-bed communal living facility. The majority of families share rooms, while others are assigned a single room. There is one bathroom for every two rooms and a limited number of personal bathrooms. The dining area is a public space. A cook prepares lunch and dinner daily. The average stay is three months, with a maximum of four. Some programs provided to women include counselling, support, job training and skills development. Children's programming is comprised of culture, recreational and academic programs, including a nightly homework club.

An *Ex-Resident Program Coordinator* leads the Outreach Program, providing outreach and support to women who have left the shelter. The Ex-Resident Coordinator does not tend to work directly with the child but rather refers the child to other external supports. She provides individual and group counselling and referrals, conducts advocacy, assists women to register their children in school/daycare, attends school meetings if needed, and supports the mother-child relationship.

Julliette's Place⁹ is a non-city run shelter for abused women aged 16 years or older and their children, pregnant single women in their third trimester, women with children in the care of the Children's Aid Society (CAS), or refugee claimant families. The Ministry of Community and Social Services, Ontario Trillium Foundation, corporate donors and community members fund the shelter. Julliette's Place, comprised of 12 rooms (one family per room and one specifically for single women), 35 beds, one shared kitchen and five shared bathrooms, is the largest women's shelter to date. Women are responsible for providing themselves and their children with breakfast and lunch. A cook prepares dinner during the week, while women alternate dinner preparation on the weekend. The shelter distributes a chore list to women and children 16 years of age and older in efforts to empower residents to take pride in their environment. The average length of stay is three months. Residents qualify for priority-subsidized housing, a program offered to women who

⁸ Data was collected from a staff focus group discussion on 11 May 2005 and the websites www.endviolencealliance.com; www.sacc.to/ghlb/helpline; www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca; and www.toronto.ca.

⁹ Data was collected from a staff focus group discussion on 17 May 2005 and the shelter's website www.julliettesplace.org.

have experienced abuse¹⁰. Unlike some other area shelters, Juliette's Place does not offer a follow-up program. However, women are welcome to contact the shelter at any time if they have questions or are in need of assistance.

The shelter offers a variety of programs to women and children. Participation in the women's program and residents' meeting is compulsory. The women's program is comprised of education, life skills, crisis intervention, recreation, support, counselling and housing advocacy among other things. The resident's meeting is a time for residents to discuss house issues and for staff to share any important information with the women. Children's programs include education (tutoring/mentoring), recreation (social, cognitive and physical), support services, counselling, referrals and advocacy, and support groups for children who have witnessed and/or experienced violence. The shelter does not provide a formal homework club; staff will assist children when requested. Volunteers are vital in providing support to ongoing programs, fundraising and administration.

Birkdale Residence¹¹ is a city-run shelter that offers emergency housing for women with and without children, many of whom are fleeing domestic abuse. Birkdale works with multiple partners and has two Scarborough locations, one of which is a motel. Funding is provided from numerous sources including, among others, the City of Toronto community partners, United Way, Children's Aid Foundation, Human Resources Social Development (HRSD) and SCPI. The average stay is between three and six months; yet, there is no enforced time limit. The main Birkdale site provides an individual-oriented lifestyle. In the majority of cases, each family occupies a room. All rooms are equipped with a personal bathroom, table and chairs, refrigerator and microwave. Communal kitchens are provided where residents cook meals and later re-heat them in their rooms.

The shelter offers various programs for women and children. Some programs include adult and child counselling, mother support programs, the refugee claimants family program, and housing and *follow-up program*, which assists families to prepare for, obtain and sustain permanent housing in the community. Birkdale also provides a broad range of nightly children's programming¹², comprised of social, educational and recreational components, with an aim to meet children's physical, emotional, recreational and educational needs. Programming for teens, once provided, no longer exists. Many programs, such as the resiliency program, concentrate on teaching children social and life skills in support of single mothers; mothers, too, are encouraged to participate. Workshops focus on issues such as self-esteem, hygiene, cooking, grocery shopping and laundry among other things.

Family Residence¹³ is a city-run shelter that provides short-term emergency shelter for homeless families with children and homeless at-risk pregnant women with partners. The City of Toronto community partners provides funding. The average stay ranges from three to six months.

¹⁰ The priority-subsidized housing program operates through Toronto Social Housing Connection (formerly Metro Housing). Shelter staff assists a woman with the application process and provides letters of support to verify the abuse that was reported. The application then passes to specific workers at Toronto Social Housing Connection who examine the file and set an interview with the woman. The file then proceeds to a committee who decides whether or not the woman qualifies for priority housing. If so, her application is put to the top of the housing list and she waits for a unit to become available (focus group discussion, Juliette's Place, 17 May 2005).

¹¹ Data was collected from literature provided by Birkdale Residence.

¹² Evening programming is not provided on Saturday and Sunday evenings.

¹³ Data was collected from a focus group discussion 18 April, staff interviews on 19 May and the City of Toronto website www.toronto.ca/housing.

However, there is no maximum limit. Family Residence has a total of three Scarborough locations: the main site and two off-site motels. Services provided include counselling, support groups, parenting programs, housing assistance, referral, outreach and children and youth programming. The latter includes nursery school and after-school programming in evenings and weekends with social, educational, recreational and nutritional foci; i.e. homework club/Study Buddies, snack program, ESL, movie screenings, library visits and other special events.

Family Residence offers an *Outreach Program*, where the *Outreach Worker* meets with the family in the community and assists in all ways possible to ensure that the family remains housed. This program is mandatory when Family Residence finds a family housing; it is optional when families secure their own accommodation.

Part B – Methodology

Research was conducted with an aim to better understand the experiences of homeless children and their families living in Scarborough. Specific focus lay on the educational needs of homeless children, and the links between homelessness and school success. School success here denotes academic achievement, sense of belonging and connection at school, and social and behavioural well-being. This study utilized a qualitative approach that involves children, parents, shelter staff and educators.

The underlying premise is that children from homeless families have unique problems that create barriers to accessing educational and other basic services, even when such services are readily available. The objective of this study is to capture the children's perspectives by talking to, interacting with and observing them, as well as interviewing their parents, shelter staff, school personnel and other external experts. Participant shelters include those previously outlined in Part A of this report viz. Red Door Family Shelter, Emily Stowe Shelter for Women, Juliette's Place, Birkdale Residence and Family Residence. Participant schools include Edgewood Public School, West Hill Public School, Wexford Public School and Galloway Road Public School.

For the purposes of this project, an Advisory Committee comprised of representatives from Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre (ADCFC), the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (CSPC-T), shelter staff and educators was developed. The Committee met regularly to review documents, develop research materials, provide feedback and direction, and put forward a series of recommendations that will assist in the development and promotion of public policy and practice, improvement of service delivery to school age homeless children, and elaboration of practical training strategies and resources for professional development.

I. Participants and Data Collection

Participants were requested to share their perceptions and ideas for change surrounding issues that impact homeless children's school success, including children's experiences in schools and shelters. A series of survey questionnaires and consent forms was developed for parents, children¹⁴, shelter staff and teachers/administrators respectively; participation was voluntary and confidential.

Focus groups and interviews took place between 13 April and 28 September 2005 at selected shelters and schools. These included a total of:

- Four focus groups and three interviews with parents;
- Five focus groups and ten interviews with children;
- Five focus groups and seven follow-up interviews with shelter staff; and
- Four focus groups and two interviews with school staff

The breakdown of participants is provided below in Tables 2 and 3 respectively.

In addition, four meetings were conducted with external experts working and/or familiar with the issues. These included interviews with a non-participant public school guidance counsellor, a

¹⁴ Participation of the children depended on parental consent.

Toronto university professor, a researcher in the Inner City Health Research Unit (St. Michael's Hospital), and ADCFC staff working with homeless children in participant schools. All group and individual sessions were audio taped with participants' consent, with a recorder taking detailed notes of the proceedings¹⁵. Data analysis was conducted between August and November 2005.

A total of 161 people participated in this study. As outlined below in Table 1, this includes 24 parents, 31 children, 31 shelter staff, 69 teachers/administrators and six external experts. Tables 2 and 3 highlight the number of participants per shelter and school respectively:

**Table 1
Number of participants**

Participants	Number
Parents	24
Children	31
Shelter staff	31
Teachers/Administrators	69
External experts	6
TOTAL	161

**Table 2
Number of participants per shelter**

Shelter	Number of Parents	Number of Children	Number of Shelter Staff
Family Residence	8	10	13
Birkdale Residence	7	11	8
Red Door Family Shelter	4	4	6
Emily Stowe Shelter for Women	3	3	2
Julliette's Place	2	3	2
TOTAL	24	31	31

¹⁵ Meetings with the school guidance counsellor and university professor were not audio taped.

Table 3
Number of participants per school

School	Number of teachers/administrators
Galloway Road Public School	16
Edgewood Public School	24
West Hill Public School	16
Wexford Public School	13
TOTAL	69

II. Parents

Homeless peoples, both young and old, are a heterogeneous population with multiple experiences and interrelated needs. For instance, parents who participated in this study originated from numerous countries, spoke distinct languages, were of various self-identified ethno-racial backgrounds, had diverse levels of education and employment statuses, and different sources of income. Out of 23 participants¹⁶, twenty were women and three men, with an average age of 36.4 years. Fifteen participants identified themselves as single/separated/divorced and eight as married/common-law.

All participants were cohabiting with at least one child; one participant was also acting as a caregiver to four grandchildren. Cohabiting children ranged in age from 9 months to 18 years for boys, and 3 months to 22 years for girls. The average age for both male and female cohabitants was ten years. Twenty-two percent (22%) of participants were also cohabiting with an adult partner. It is important to note that some participating parents/caregivers had their children partake in this study while some others did not. Conversely, some child participants' parents chose not to participate on their own accord. As such, there is no direct or consistent correlation between participating parents and children.

Four participants identified their birthplace as Canada, three as Toronto and five as other Canadian cities¹⁷. Eleven participants are foreign-born, originating from various countries including Ghana, Zimbabwe, Jamaica, Israel, Mozambique, Russia, Trinidad, Afghanistan, Italy and Iran. Lengths of time spent in Canada varied and are highlighted in Table 4:

¹⁶ The following data is based on information obtained from written survey questionnaires. Twenty-three out of 24 participants completed them.

¹⁷ Four of these cities are within the province of Ontario and one in Alberta.

Table 4
Participants' length of time spent in Canada

Number of participants	Number of years in Canada
2	Less than one year
2	1 to 4 years
2	5 to 9 years
5	10+ years

Some participants reported a range of ethno-racial backgrounds including: Aboriginal (1), Afghan (1), Black (3), Canadian (2), Iranian (1), Israeli (1), Italian (1), Russian (1), Trinidadian (2) and White (5). Three participants identified themselves as having two or more ethno-racial backgrounds, viz. Aboriginal-Polish (1), Portuguese-African (1), and Black-White (1). The majority of participants spoke English. Tables 5, 6 and 7 illustrate the number of participants' first language, family-spoken language, and non-official spoken language(s) respectively:

Table 5
First languages

First language	Number of participants
English	11
Fanti	1
Czech	1
Afrikaans	1
Hebrew	1
Portuguese	1
Russian	1
Dari	1
Farsi	1
Italian	2
English and other language	2

Table 6
Family-spoken languages

Family language	Number of participants
English	17
Hebrew	1
Russian	1
Italian	1
Farsi	1
Dari	1

Table 7
Non-official spoken languages

Other language	Number of participants
Czech	1
Maiseet	1
Portuguese	1
Russian	1
French/Spanish	1

As Table 8 illustrates, the majority of participants have a high school education or higher:

Table 8
Levels of education

Levels of education	Number of participants
Grade School	2
High School	7
Some College	9
Some University	5

Most participants were without paid work. The majority identified parenting/caregiver as their primary form of employment, while a few were actively seeking work. Two participants were currently employed; one in part-time work, the other in casual employment. With regards to income, 17 participants received the Child Tax Benefit and/or the Personal Needs Allowance (PNA) of \$3.75 per day¹⁸. Four respondents relied on Ontario Works, one on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and two on employment wages.

¹⁸ As previously mentioned, this figure is scheduled to increase five cents on December 1st 2005 for a total of \$3.80 per day.

III. Children

A total of 31 children participated in this study. Some of these children were those of participant parents/caregivers while others were not. Twenty-three (23) children identified living with a single parent¹⁹, six with two parents, and two with a caregiver. A large proportion of participants were only children; a small number have siblings who live elsewhere. As outlined in Table 9, children ranged in age from six to twelve:

Table 9
Number of children per age

Age	Number of children
Six	9
Seven	6
Eight	6
Nine	2
Ten	2
Eleven	4
Twelve	2
TOTAL	31

The majority of participants were in grade one at the time of the study while two were not presently enrolled in school²⁰. Table 10 provides a breakdown of children per grade:

Table 10
Number of children per grade

Grade	Number of children
Kindergarten	1
Grade 1	10
Grade 2	6
Grade 3	5
Grade 4	1
Grade 5	3
Grade 6	3
Not currently enrolled	2

Eight participants attended Edgewood Public School, six Galloway Road Public School, one West Hill Public School and three Wexford Public School. Other participant children attended Catholic and neighbouring schools as well as schools for children with special needs.

¹⁹ Twenty children live with their mother and three with their father.

²⁰ One participant arrived to the shelter with less than two weeks of school remaining. Another participant was under six years of age.

IV. Shelter staff

A total of 31 shelter staff participated in focus groups and follow-up interview discussions. They included Child Advocate Workers (CAW), Child Counsellors, Child Programmers, Daycare Recreational Assistants (DCRA), and Daycare Workers. In order to ensure accuracy of information, a follow-up interview was scheduled with Child Advocate Workers and Counsellors following the completion of all parent and child sessions per shelter; they were extremely fruitful.

As outlined in Table 2, a total of 13 staff participated from Family Residence, eight from Birkdale Residence, six from Red Door Family Shelter, two from Emily Stowe Shelter for Women and two from Julliette's Place.

V. Schools

The four participant schools in this study include Edgewood Public School, West Hill Public School, Wexford Public School and Galloway Road Public School.

Edgewood Public School is a Kindergarten to Grade eight composite school that offers a well-balanced program to meet the social, emotional, physical and academic needs of all its students. The school provides a full daytime academic program as well as extra-curricular activities. As of September 2005, Edgewood had approximately 400 students, 25 (6%) of whom were homeless. However, this figure is forever in flux; i.e. decreasing by the end of each month, increasing in January and again following spring break.

When one participant shelter initially moved into the area in 1996, the City informed the local community that the move was only temporary. However, the move became permanent. The community was so concerned that children living in the shelter would negatively impact other students that they managed to pass through a cap on the number of children living in a shelter who could attend; it remains in effect today. The City has limited this number to twenty-five (25).

Many students at Edgewood are newcomers to Canada. In 2004, approximately 4% of students had lived in Canada for two years or less, and 8% between three and five years²¹. The school has an informal buddy system whereby a selected student is responsible to make a new classmate feel welcome and familiarize him/her with the school.

Until recently, Edgewood had a full-time liaison person, employed by the Child Development Institute (CDI²²), whose responsibilities included welcoming a new mother and student to the school, introducing them to the school principal, administrators and staff, and providing emotional and academic support as needed. In June 2005, CDI eliminated this position. In September 2005, ADCFC increased the programs provided to the shelter by introducing its Helping Hands at School program²³, providing a Child and Youth Worker for five hours per

²¹ (www.tdsb.on.ca)

²² CDI was formerly known as The Creche.

²³ The Helping Hands at School program provides direct service to children living in shelters for homeless families, consultation to school staff, and liaison with shelter staff and parents. Direct service to children includes individual counseling and/or group discussions. Areas of focus include social skill development,

week, and collaborating with the school and shelter in efforts to meet the children's needs during school hours.

Edgewood is particularly challenged financially as it is not considered to be an inner city school. As such, it does not qualify as a recipient for extra financial support. The school's numbers are neither big enough to have a Vice-Principal nor small enough to receive additional assistance. This lack of support impedes staff from effectively meeting the needs of all students living in shelters, who are in dire need of extra support.

West Hill Public School is an inner city Kindergarten to Grade 8 school that offers a full daytime academic and co-curricular program as well as after-school academic remediation and a wide variety of clubs, sports, groups and activities. The school serves a community that is both economically and culturally diverse. Many families are temporary residents and newcomers to Canada. In the spring of 2004, approximately 7% of students had lived in Canada for two years or less, and 13% between three and five years²⁴.

West Hill has approximately 230 students. In 2004, an estimated 20% were homeless. This figure significantly declined by September 2005, when the school had approximately six children (or 3%) residing in shelters. According to school personnel, the pattern is very unpredictable and can change at a moment's notice. In the past, the first half of the school year witnessed a large influx of homeless students versus the second half when numbers tend to diminish after Christmas. Teachers also noted the change in the shelter population. In the past, the majority of homeless students were refugees and their length of stay in the system tended to be short. Today, homeless students are largely from Canadian-born families and they tend to remain in a state of crisis/cycle of homelessness for a longer duration of time.

West Hill initiated the *Ambassador's Club*, an exemplary program that provides leadership and mentoring opportunities for students in all grade levels. Students are selected to mentor children who are new to the school. Mentors are assigned the responsibility of taking new students on a school tour, introducing them to teachers and students, and helping them make friends at recess and lunchtimes. The position of Ambassador may either be on a full-year or per-term basis. All Ambassadors complete a training session and are clad in a t-shirt bearing the label 'Ambassador' and school name. West Hill has had such success with the program that it has garnered well-acclaimed attention. As a result, in September 2005 Galloway Road Public School started the Ambassador's Club in its own school.

Wexford Public School is a Kindergarten to Grade 8 school that offers both a thorough academic program and extended learning opportunities in the arts, athletics and technology. Wexford is a receiving school for students in transition, is site-accessible for physically challenged students, and is affiliated with a local licensed daycare facility (A Child's Place Daycare Centre).

Wexford has approximately 500 students, less than 10% of which are homeless; an estimated 50% are enrolled in the school's ESL class. The number of homeless children increases dramatically in September of each year, but decreases as the school year progresses. However, the pattern is largely unpredictable, having been compared to a 'revolving door' (focus group, Wexford Public School, 28 September 2005). Wexford, like Edgewood, has an informal buddy system whereby a selected student is responsible to make a new classmate feel welcome and

self-esteem, anger management, building resilience and dealing with reactions to being exposed to domestic violence (ADCFC 2003).

²⁴ (www.tdsb.on.ca)

familiarize him/her with the school. In addition, Wexford serves a very economically and culturally diverse community. In the spring of 2004, approximately 14% of students had lived in Canada for two years or less, and 11% between three and five years²⁵.

Galloway Road Public School is a Kindergarten to Grade 8 inner city school located in a mixed socio-economic area. Many students attending Galloway Road reside in single family, rental, cooperative and shelter housing. In June 2005, the student population totalled approximately 215. Despite the fact that the total number of students tends to range from 240 to 265, the school welcomes close to 500 students during the year. There is a significant turnover rate that varies throughout the year and from one year to the next. For example, in June 2005 the school had six homeless students versus mid-year with twenty students and 1999 with ninety. Generally speaking, the school has a high influx of children living in a shelter at the beginning of September and at the start of each new month. As previously mentioned, in September 2005 Galloway Road began the 'Ambassador's Club'. This program will help new students feel welcome at the school and orient them to their new environment.

Galloway Road also serves a very culturally diverse community. In 2004, approximately 83% of 238 students were born in Canada, with 17% stemming from various countries including the Philippines, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, Guyana, the United States, China, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Ghana, Kenya, Poland, Bangladesh, Russia, Trinidad and Tobago, Somalia, Barbados and Hungary. An estimated 78% of students speak English at home, with others speaking Tagalog, Tamil, Chinese, Somali, Urdu, Polish, Spanish, Bengali, Sinhalese, Twi, Swahili, Vietnamese, Arabic, Hungarian and Farsi. Approximately 3% of students lived in Canada for two years or less, and 8% between three and five years²⁶.

²⁵ (Ibid)

²⁶ (Ibid)

Part C – Research Findings

The following research findings reflect perspectives of parents, primarily single mothers, school age children, shelter staff and teachers/administrators on challenges preventing homeless children from achieving school success. Success here includes academic achievement, social inclusiveness and emotional well-being.

It is important to reiterate that not all participating parents/caregivers had their children partake in this study. Conversely, some parents of child participants chose not to be involved on their own accord. As such, there is no direct or consistent correlation between participating parents and children. This accounts for different statistics between the two cohorts.

I. Reasons for seeking shelter

Parent participants identified reasons for seeking shelter as fleeing abuse (52%) and the inability to pay rent (35%)²⁷. Additional reasons include altercations with former landlords, ‘family issues’ and disability. Children also admitted to being in a shelter for reasons of abuse (61%) or poverty (39%).

Domestic violence and the inability to pay rent remain significant concerns throughout Toronto. On April 14 2004, 3,274 women and 2,835 children sought temporary accommodation in a women’s shelter; 82% were escaping abuse. In addition, poverty continues to impact families and children at an alarming rate, a situation that is further aggravated by a lack of affordable housing, unemployment, evictions, ineffective social programs and discrimination.

II. Living in a shelter

Approximately 54.5% of adult and 45% of child participants reported having previous shelter experience; 36.4% and 45% respectively have not²⁸. Adult participants’ length of stay ranged from a minimum of two weeks to a maximum of seven months, with an average stay of three months across the five participant shelters. Children’s concept of time differs from that of their parent(s)/caregiver. Older children frequently describe their length of stay in quantitative terms (two weeks, one month), while younger children opt for more qualitative descriptions (a ‘medium time’, ‘kind of a long time’). In both instances, children are aware of the extent of time spent at the shelter, as it is increasingly reflected in their behaviour and emotional state. According to one teacher, children begin to deteriorate the longer they remain in the shelter:

²⁷ Two out of the five participant shelters were specifically shelters for abused women and children.

²⁸ Nine percent (9%) of adults and ten percent (10%) of children are unknown.

'...You can see the slow deterioration over time. The longer they stay in the shelter, the more gradually they deteriorate. So they come in [to school] and they feel that this is a happy and safe place and that they are going to do well...but over time, the shelters take their toll...Those are the kids that you slowly lose'.

(Focus group, teachers)

Factors impacting levels of stress

Parents and children identified both positive and negative aspects of living in a shelter, many of which were similar. Positive features tend to ameliorate stress while negative qualities often increase it. For instance, children found that living in a shelter reduced feelings of loneliness, increased emotional support and encouragement, and offered more activities and programs than previous places of residence.

Younger children appeared more positive and adaptable, even comparing shelter living to camp life. Some children were not made aware that they are living in a homeless shelter, but rather are told by their parents that they are in a temporary alternative environment/'centre' in efforts to minimize apprehension. Older children, in contrast, were more vocal of their discontent with shelter life. According to one frontline worker, children's reactions can often be mixed:

'You may have a child that's been through the system numerous times and sometimes this is the best place they've ever known. They know if they come here they are getting fed, they get to play, and they've got people who ask about them...so for them it's a positive experience. But then you may have [other children] the same age [and] their [school] friends have found out that they are in a shelter and now they're being stigmatized. They've got people picking on them because they live in a shelter and it's made it the worst experience of their life'.

(Focus group, shelter staff)

However, many children, both young and old, did express various negative facets about shelter life. Children most commonly reported the lack of privacy and space, as well as overcrowded noisy conditions, as the most negative features about living in a shelter. For instance, each family shares a room and this can become more problematic for children as they age. In addition, each room is supposed to be respected as private but often is not as younger children randomly open doors at will.

Many children also expressed embarrassment and shame surrounding their new place of residence; they clearly feel a stigma about not having a home:

'...I don't want my [school] friends to know that I live in a shelter...I tell them [I am] living in an apartment and I'm looking for a house...I just don't want them to know I live here'.

(Focus group, children)

According to one teacher, children internalize the stigma associated with living in a shelter and begin to lose hope the longer they remain in the system:

'It's the ones that...you could almost term "lifers"...the kids who have been in [the shelter] over a year or get out to some kind of housing which isn't necessarily better. Sometimes they live in neighbourhoods where there aren't any supports, where there are a lot of...social problems...Perhaps they get evicted from there and they end up back in [the shelter]. Now talk about stigma. Especially when you're older...'

(Focus group, teachers)

Other child complaints included a disconnect between social life inside and outside of the shelter, for reasons of anonymity and security; feelings of constant surveillance; a shortage of computers²⁹; lack of appropriate programs for children aged eleven to fourteen, who consequently attend the same programs for children six years of age and older; high levels of bureaucracy; strict rules³⁰; and stress of communal living, notably dislike over unkempt bathrooms and communally prepared food.

Parents, like children, found positive and negative aspects about shelter life. For instance, some felt relief at having a roof over their head and no bills to pay, while others were satisfied at having more available time to spend with their children. Many parents were also pleased with shelter-provided supports such as counselling and children's programming.

However, parents, like children, readily complained about the lack of privacy, independence and space, as well as feelings of being under constant surveillance:

'You'd think that coming here [to the shelter] would make it a whole lot easier but in a way, like emotionally...it can be draining...your parenting skills are under scrutiny...it's just all those extra steps...you feel like you're under more pressure being in...open custody.'

(Focus group, parents)

Residents were dissatisfied with having to comply with certain rules, like curfews, and bureaucratic regulations such as disclosing one's personal finances to shelter staff. The stress of communal living and overcrowded conditions wore heavily on some parents, with consistency and discipline becoming problematic. Many parents felt it difficult to maintain a routine in such a disorganized environment, while others felt like failures, harbouring guilt at bringing their children to the shelter; they attempted to compensate by providing children with daily treats:

'...Everybody has different parenting skills around here. Everybody has different bedtimes and every other kid's allowed to do something different...it's very hard...and you think that you're the one that's suffering...but I really feel that it's the children that suffer most.'

(Focus group, parents)

²⁹ This complaint varied between shelters as some older shelters had only one computer compared to newer shelters that had between three and five.

³⁰ Older children often complained about a standard bedtime which they perceived as too early.

'We feel a lot of guilt so it's like "here have this"...we compensate for what we think they're not getting and...meanwhile they need discipline and consistency, that's it. They don't need a new bag [of chips] everyday'.

(Focus group, parents)

Parents also worried about the impact of shelter life on their children:

'I don't mind trying to adapt to somebody else's lifestyle and what not, but I mean the kids have already been exposed to verbal abuse and now it's like they're becoming angry and upset too...It's only a matter of time before the kids start verbally abusing each other'.

(Focus group, parents)

Parents were eager to find stable appropriate housing. However, most were unable to do so as they found it difficult to secure employment while living in the shelter. Ninety-three percent (93%) of participants provide transit for their children, including walking, driving and/or accompanying them on the TTC. This impedes parents from being able to in work full-time employment. Night and/or shift work is also problematic as it is difficult to arrange after-school/evening daycare.

Perceptions of behaviour/behavioural changes in children

Upon arriving at the shelter, children are confronted with a host of changes including, among other things, a new environment, routine and often school. So many changes can be overwhelming. It is therefore not surprising that some children begin to exhibit certain behaviours that they never had prior to their arrival. Parents, shelter staff and teachers were able to identify particular actions, reactions and attitudes that they felt stemmed from the child's turbulent circumstances.

For instance, many parents felt that their children were beginning to worry more since arriving in the shelter, particularly about adult concerns such as money. Such apprehension, combined with fear of being in the shelter, had caused incontinence in some children, both young and old:

'I noticed he's starting to worry because he asked me about a week ago how I'm going to manage to get the money to move out of here for all of us. And [I've] never seen him...worry like this before'.

(Focus group, parents)

In addition, the disjuncture between old and new environments, coupled with the dislike of attending a new school, had caused physical changes, illness, such as vomiting and hearing loss, bewilderment and withdrawn behaviour in some children:

'...He started to...not hear. If you [are] talking to him, you have to be in front of him to talk and then he'll pay attention. He was so distracted by not being in the [same] school and everything that he got...cut off...he would not [notice] anything around him. So that's a difference because at the [old] house, that wasn't happening. It's when we move here [to the shelter] and after upsetting over school...'

(Focus group, parents)

Many shelter staff perceived that parents are 'parentifying' their children; i.e. sharing a significant amount of adult information that might cause a child to worry. For example, staff noted how children often spoke of costly apartment rents, difficulty obtaining welfare, and anxiety over a parent's job search. Staff felt that the shelter provided an environment in which children have more liberty and opportunity to be children, despite the fact that many act as caretakers of siblings and interpreters for parents:

'...They have the opportunity to experience a life out of their problems and family issues – that's why the kids love so much to go to the daycare... [It's] one of the main things that they can experience in the shelter that they are not allowed to experience at home... [a] place to be for a few hours with people their age'.

(Focus group, shelter staff)

Parents, shelter staff and teachers identified the lack of children's self-esteem as an issue of significant concern. Homelessness can have many negative impacts on children. Some children may become more withdrawn, including children who have experienced or witnessed abuse. Children who become withdrawn may prefer to maintain a physical and/or emotional distance. This issue will be further explored shortly, particularly as it relates to social relationships.

Parents, shelter staff and teachers perceived some children to be aggressive. Parents felt that children who are bullied at school subsequently lash out on other family members and children at the shelter in frustration. Inconsistent communication with an absent parent was also identified as fostering changes in a child's mood and/or behaviour. Some teachers felt that certain children living at the shelter sought ways to control and/or dominate the classroom, particularly if they were caregivers to younger siblings; i.e. carrying over a custodial role.

Teachers and shelter staff felt that some children lacked social and organizational skills. Regarding the former, children were noted as arguing and tattle tailing amongst themselves and with other school children. Some shelter staff highlighted a perceived link between sociability and parenting:

'A lot of the children who have parents that are much more involved in their life, they are more sociable than others. And those that have...conflicts with their parents...they are a little more secluded'.

(Focus group, shelter staff)

'...One of the children here who is having problems with their parents...tends to express more aggressive behaviour to the other children...the [other] parents have asked for [this child] to stay away'.

(Focus group, shelter staff)

Regarding organizational skills, or lack thereof, teachers described the children as frequently losing things such as textbooks, library books and musical instruments among other things. One school administrator stated that children living in the shelter tend to come to the office more often than other children because they have forgotten their books and need a parent to bring them to the school. Moreover, a lack of organizational abilities was also noted as impacting motor skills:

'...They haven't had many possessions, so when you give [the children] books...they put them in their desk [and] they're lost. It'll take them ten minutes just to get their book out and find a pencil. So what you quite often have to do is [to] do it for them...Same thing with their writing. Quite often you see...there's very little organization on the page just because the basic skills aren't there...they didn't have scissors, they didn't have pencils...fine motor skills aren't there'.

(Focus group, teachers)

Homeless children are distinctly confronted with formidable challenges associated with residential instability and related family and school disruptions. Despite providing effective supports, shelter life can be traumatizing for children and parents alike. Lack of quiet, private spaces, negative impacts of congregate living on parenting and the mother/child relationship, and the stigma of being homeless combined tend to foster behavioural changes in children. A comprehensive system of care that serves the well-being of the entire family is critical (Rosenheck et al. 1990).

Social relationships

Many children lose contact with old friends once they enter the shelter for various reasons such as security issues, including the inability to invite others to their new place of residence. Despite missing their friends, children tend to get along with each other at the shelter, with many even staying in touch once they have moved out. Children tend to play together in the daycare/playroom, individual family rooms, hallways and stairwells (though prohibited), dining halls and outside yards. Staff frequently described social relationships at the shelter in familial terms:

'...It's a bit like a big family because they are all living in the same house, under the same roof...shared dining room, shared spaces, shared TV room and so forth'.

(Focus group, shelter staff)

However, friendships also depend on various factors such as age, gender and time spent at the shelter. For instance, new arrivals at one shelter were described as initially timid, often opting not to participate in organized activities. However, as time progresses and comfort levels set in, children frequently become territorial of their space, assuming their place in what some shelter staff denoted a ‘hierarchy of power’ in the daycare. Other children were noted to ‘police’ each other outside of the shelter, particularly in school; i.e. to later recount school misbehaviours. Conversely, some teachers noted that disputes/confrontations in the shelter often carry over into the school:

‘...If there’s some argument, difficulty, fight, it carries over to the school so that in the morning they come to school and they’ve had a big to do at homework club last night [and] it starts right up in the classroom...Often the kids are right in the same class and so it becomes an issue that the teacher has to deal with whatever happened...’

(Focus group, teachers)

Children, particularly younger, often become quite attached to shelter staff, confiding personal fears, hopes and experiences; older children can be more reserved. The majority of children will open up to parent(s) and shelter personnel if they are sad or in need of assistance, including issues pertaining to school. Regarding the latter, a Shelter-School Liaison Worker, is extremely pivotal in such situations as teachers and parents tend to have very little direct communication. In addition, some children develop strong attachments to shelter staff, making a transition out of the shelter difficult:

‘When I was at the [other shelter]...I would ask one of the Children’s Advocates [for assistance]...but when I moved it wasn’t really happy...I didn’t know anybody in the [new] staff’.

(Focus group, children)

Some children will confide in their teachers while others will not; it depends on the child. Some will not elaborate on reasons for being in the shelter but will discuss shelter life, while others fear saying something ‘wrong’ that could lead to their removal by the Children’s Aid Society (CAS):

‘I had a few [children] open up to me. It’s mostly about not feeling wanted...a few of them [talked] about the living conditions, where they’re at...whether they have to share a common kitchen and bathroom and...sometimes...some of the tenants...tend to have arguments and big disputes...I had one girl actually ask me, “how do I get out of an environment like this?”’

(Focus group, teachers)

Social relationships are critical for children as many parents struggle to recover from events leading up to their present circumstance, notably abuse and poverty. Homelessness can take a toll on the already challenging job of parenting children (American Psychiatric Association 1990). Parents struggling with survival and healing may have little energy left to support children’s emotional needs. For instance, many homeless mothers have experienced traumatic events prior to becoming homeless including a childhood history of physical and sexual abuse, family instability, foster care placement, or an adult history of being beaten by a spouse or partner. Many have weak support networks prior to seeking shelter and few friends or relatives to assist them.

Such experiences and characteristics significantly undermine attachments and self-esteem, and thus might account for difficulties with sustaining relationships. Nevertheless, many homeless parents exhibit extraordinary persistence and ingenuity in overcoming adversity.

III. School success

Changing schools

The majority of homeless children are behind academically, often the result of missing school and/or frequently moving. Changing schools causes delays and interruptions in a child’s learning, require adjusting to a new environment, and developing new friendships. The numbers of schools participant children have attended since kindergarten ranges from two to ten, with one young child having changed schools four times within a period of one year. As Table 11 highlights, the majority of participant children (or 35%) reported having attended two schools since kindergarten:

Table 11
Number of schools attended since kindergarten

Number of Children	Number of Schools since Kindergarten
11	2
7	1
5	3
4	4
1	5
2	9+

Two children were currently not attending school, while another described the total number of schools attended as ‘a lot’.

Parents and children’s explanations for such changes included (i) frequently moving around (changing cities, provinces and houses), and (ii) fleeing abuse. According to one eleven year old:

‘...I’m not used to getting settled right now. The longest I’ve ever lived in one place was two years...my mom’s getting abused is why we keep on moving’.

(Interview)

Changing schools also involves changing neighbourhoods, with some participants moving from various metropolitan areas and others from the Greater Toronto Area. Some children welcomed the change of schools for reasons including having a fresh start, escaping bullies from past schools, being appropriately placed in a special class and having extra supports. However, the majority of children reported having regret, sadness and fear to the change. Primary reasons included leaving old friends behind, changes to and/or repeating already learned curricula, feelings of overall confusion and disorientation, bullying, and being in a new and at times unwelcoming environment:

'It's confusing. 'Cause at one school I'll have finished one unit and then I move and have to start a unit again, or they'll be in the middle of a unit and I won't know anything about it. Also...at [School "X"] I had no friends at all... [At School "Y"] I had lots of friends'.

(Focus group, children)

'I get confused because I keep on switching, switching, switching. I'm like "what happened"?'

(Focus group, children)

According to some teachers, children tend to have trouble picking up at a new school, particularly when they are aware that it is only temporary. The older they become, the more conscious they are of their circumstances, including the impact on their education. According to one teacher,

'I had one [student say to me], "You know I don't expect my parents to expect me to do well in school when they, every four or five weeks, are flipping me around. I can't even multiply and I'm in grade seven'.

(Focus group, teachers)

High levels of transience also impact children's ability to form social relationships with school children and teachers. The relationship between mobility and sociability will be elaborated in the coming sections.

Enrolment

The majority of parents stated that enrolling children in school was relatively easy with the assistance of shelter staff. However, the issue became more complex in situations involving a child with special needs or behavioural issues; they can wait up to two weeks before successful registration. Generally speaking, Children's Advocates and Counsellors assist parents in enrolling their children for school. One participant shelter is an exception, with the Shelter-School Liaison Worker assuming full responsibility in this process.

The majority of parents stated that their children did not miss a lot of time in between schools. Elapsed time ranged from a few days to two weeks. Reasons for slight enrolment delays include: (i) retrieving missing documents such as birth certificates; (ii) securing accommodation in a special school; (iii) transferring files and report cards from out-of-town schools; and (iv) enrolling a child in an out-of-district school.

Parents reported that the transfer of the Ontario School Records (OSR) proceeded relatively smoothly, with an average transfer time of approximately two weeks³¹. Children are placed in class based on their age rather than record information. The school Principal and/or Administrator places the child prior to receiving the OSR. Once it arrives, children can be placed into special programs such as the Learning Enrichment Academic Program (LEAP) among others. However, the delay of the OSR clearly compromises an already vulnerable child's needs.

³¹ Enrolment can become a significant problem for secondary school students as schools will not readily accept them mid-semester.

Attendance

According to both parents and children, children attend school daily. Common exceptions to attending include appointments or illness, while communication with an absent parent and/or bad weather is less commonly reported. School personnel identified additional reasons for non-attendance including the lack of lunch money, no clean laundry and inability for parents to awaken in the morning, a very common occurrence. Administrators must often telephone the shelter to inquire into the whereabouts of a child; this remains an ongoing concern. The shortage of Attendance Counsellors only aggravates matters.

Children admitted to attending school though many of them vehemently do not wish to do so. Some reasons include feelings of alienation and despair and fearing bullies. According to one single mother,

'I think sometimes he feels so depressed and everything, he actually was throwing up. That way he knew he didn't have to go to school'.

(Focus group, parents)

Despite such experiences, teachers at one participant school perceived that homeless children enthusiastically enjoy attending school, so much so that they often prefer to stay after-hours:

'... Coming to school is the most normal thing that a kid has for six to eight hours... Not eating where you're studying, not sleeping where you study... all we can provide for the kids is normalcy and to be flexible'.

(Focus group, teachers)

Alternatively, parents were reported as sometimes opting to keep their child away from school rather than the child not wanting to attend. In such instances, shelter staff is often not informed:

'The parent kind of keeps the child away from the school. It's not that the kids wouldn't go to school or doesn't want to go to school. It's that the parents are neglectful on that part'.

(Focus group, shelter staff)

Lateness, like attendance, is a major concern for school personnel; some children even come to see it as acceptable behaviour. This was a significant complaint raised by all teaching participants, with the exception of those from one participant school where the Shelter-School Liaison Worker walks the children to school daily. Arriving late not only centres out a child but results in him/her missing a significant portion of the curriculum such as language or mathematics, which are often taught in the morning.

Transportation

The majority of participant children (73%) walk to school either alone or accompanied by a parent/family member(s), Shelter-School Liaison Worker and/or other children. Approximately

10% take public transit either alone or accompanied by an adult/sibling, 10% are driven to school by a parent, and 7% rely on school bus transportation. Transit in this study did not appear to be an issue with regards to attending school, but rather was reported as impeding a parent from taking a child to daycare and/or counselling services. In cases where a child continues to attend his/her previous school, long-distance travelling times can be exhausting for both parent and child, who must awaken early only to spend a minimum of 1.5 hours daily on the TTC.

Shelters vary on the amount of transit fare they provide. For instance, one participant shelter provides children who depend on public transit with ten TTC tickets per week, while another does not provide transit fare at all; mothers must subsidize the expense with money from their PNA. Another participant shelter provides transit fare when the school is not in walking distance from the shelter; while two others subsidize half the ticket fare for children attending an out-of-catchment area school. When a parent cannot subsidize transit fare, they will often be recommended to relocate their children to a local school.

Homework

Children reported doing their homework in various locations including their family's room (at a table or on the bed), daycare/homework program, the shelter's cafeteria, and/or at school with and/or without teacher assistance. The majority reported to receiving help with their homework by a parent(s) and/or shelter staff, and a smaller number for their reading.

Shelter staff will provide support to children during designated homework clubs. In the event of no homework club, staff will provide assistance when needed. Some teachers from Galloway Road Public School volunteer their time at the neighbouring shelter in efforts to provide academic support to their students. Other shelters rely on university volunteers to assist the children.

The lack of a quiet private space was a significant barrier to effectively completing homework assignments. According to one parent who had lived in an off-site motel:

'They couldn't do their homework very well unless I was doing dishes in the bathroom sink and my [child] was sitting on the toilet cover there reading to me. That was how we'd have to do it'.

(Focus group, parents)

Many teachers also recognized the challenge for children to find an appropriate space to work:

'I'm noticing that they'll need a lot of second chances to do the practice that they probably couldn't find a space or a quiet place to do it at home...'

(Focus group, teachers)

Barriers to doing homework differ between shelters as each shelter has its own respective resources. One newly renovated shelter is well-equipped with computers, access to the Internet and resource rooms, while older establishments have only one computer and limited quiet spaces. Frequent complaints from child participants included the lack of a table or desk in the room, too much noise from other residents, particularly babies, and a lack of computers.

Many parents do not assist their children with homework. Some reasons include: (i) illiteracy; (ii) coping with personal issues; and (iii) lack of patience. Some shelter staff felt that parents who

were diligent with their children's homework before coming to the shelter would continue to be so while at the shelter. Other parents are often unable to help their children with their homework; some lack formal education, some do not speak English, and/or some were educated overseas and are not familiar with local teaching methods.

Many teachers admitted to making concessions regarding homework; i.e. having 'on the spot flexibility' (focus group, teachers). For instance, they will provide children in need with the necessary materials and arrange a time and/or venue, such as the lunch hour or office, for an assignment requiring a computer.

Academic performance

Generally speaking, children and their parents felt that they were doing well or satisfactory academically. However, many parents did state that their children's grades have dropped since arriving at the shelter³². Reasons included: (i) the child's lack of interest to partake in the new school; (ii) parents' inability or lack of interest to assist with the homework; (iii) removal of former supports such as home tutors; and (iv) the emotional impact of being in a shelter.

Many children were described as falling significantly below their grade level with literacy, often one grade if not two or three:

'... Out of twenty families that I have on my case load, I would say maybe there are four to five cases where the family have been so transient that the child is attending ten plus schools and might only be in grade four. [This] could be two to three times a year.'

(Focus group, shelter staff)

Some shelter staff felt that teachers at times possess unrealistic expectations of the children's academic performance given their circumstances; i.e. assuming they have pencil crayons, a space to do homework, access to computers, etc. However, teachers recounted multiple instances when they would provide children with materials and modify assignments to accommodate the children, particularly those involving references to the children's homes. In addition, many were sensitive to the children's plight, especially those who visited a shelter either through a breakfast program and/or personal invitation from staff.

According to some school personnel, a direct correlation exists between students' low self-esteem, emotional stability and academic performance; i.e. having low self-esteem critically impacts academic performance. Teachers felt that upon entering a new classroom, children want to feel welcome and wanted. Once they recognize that they are actually wanted, the children exhibit a complete turnaround and begin putting forward great interest and effort to excel. In short, children require that their basic needs are met before they will be able to have any academic and/or social success.

Some teachers expressed frustration at devoting a lot of time and energy to assist a child only to see him/her leave, often without any prior notice; '...you're putting the programming into place, you're trying to make the modifications to meet those gaps and then they're gone' (focus group, teachers). However, it is significant to note that the children themselves often do not know when they are leaving. As one ten-year-old girl explained:

³² Some children who flee abuse will improve academically as they feel safer in their new environment.

'[A lot of children] move unexpectedly. It's like they don't know they're going to move and then like in the middle of the day or so...their parents, older sibling or uncle or aunt comes over and says that they have to move now. But that sort of like takes them by surprise almost. So...I think it would be good to know ahead of time so you're ready for it instead of like just being told unexpectedly so you don't really have a choice...'

(Interview)

Social relationships

Children and children

According to parent and child participants, the stigma of living in a shelter and the reality of bullying are two significant factors impacting homeless children's social relationships with other school children. Regarding the former, younger children tend to admit to other children that they are living in a shelter, while older children often opt to conceal their place of residence. However, when questioned where they tell other children they live, many children, young and old, replied that they had never been asked to reveal their place of residence before. Shelter staff felt that some children are a little embarrassed about their situation and, as such, have difficulty making new friends for reasons including shyness and reservation³³.

Bullying is also problematic for homeless children of all ages; 'after I started to live in the shelter [the other children] find out and then they start bullying me' (focus group, children). Some parents felt that bullying is related to the fact that the children are living in a shelter while others explain it as a result of the children being new to the school and/or because of their parents. Some believed that older children encounter more social problems than younger ones. Nevertheless, fears of bullying often motivate children to leave school grounds as quickly as possible once the day is over.

Teachers also recognized the difficulty for homeless children in making new friends as they often arrive in the middle of the school year once friendships and cliques have already been formed. In addition, teachers found that many younger children were often quiet, preferring to stay close to other children from the shelter at school rather than making new friends. Some students were known to exhibit extreme forms of behaviour and were thus not readily embraced by other children. Nevertheless, there were many instances when children from the shelter did have favourable relationships at school. One program that fosters positive success is the 'Ambassador's Club', operating at West Hill and, more recently, at Galloway Road Public Schools; this combines leadership and mentoring opportunities with welcoming and inclusive practices.

In addition, teachers perceived frequent mobility as having a direct impact on social relationships; i.e. children do not always make friends when they know they will be leaving in a matter of time:

³³ According to Roschelle and Kaufman (2004), even when children's homelessness is unknown or unimportant in a relationship, children continually feel compelled to manage their spoiled identities because their stigmatization is defined by their relationship to mainstream society and is always part of their identity.

'They don't seem to have a real sense of belonging...they just feel like they don't fit in...no matter how hard we try to make them fit in. I think they figure, "I'm only going to be here for a little while and then I'm gone". [They] don't even take a responsibility for their stuff, their desk, their possessions'.

(Focus group, teachers)

Children living in shelters share many similarities with their low-income housed peers. However, homeless children distinctly retain an insecurity of place, never knowing when they might be in transit again.

Children and teachers

A large majority of children reported liking their teachers. As previously mentioned, some children will feel comfortable to confide in their teachers while others will not. However, a small number perceived their teachers as being insensitive to their circumstance. According to one ten-year-old:

'They [the teachers] know about my situation but they...treat me like...the other kids, like I'm a kid that misbehaves, yells a lot...Even though I'm in this situation...they're letting me do less stuff than I used to do in my other school'.

(Focus group, children)

Some parents also felt that teachers treat their children differently because they are living in the shelter:

'[My child] said that the teacher looked at [his artwork] and said "it shows how you felt that day and...if you have a problem at the shelter...leave your feelings there and when you come to school be okay". You can't tell an eleven-year-old just to switch off...it's bothering him...'

(Focus group, parents)

As previously mentioned, some shelter staff perceived that teachers lack sensitivity towards the children's plight. In addition, some thought that teachers might resent homeless children as they can often disrupt classroom routines and require a lot of attention, a difficult request to fill for teachers working in a classroom with over thirty students:

'Often times the reality in the classroom is...we can't necessarily go back and make up time [lost]... We don't have enough time to take that much attention and...change our entire program to suit that one kid...'

(Focus group, teachers)

However many teachers expressed their great concern for the children, investing a lot of time and energy to ensure that the students have a positive experience:

'We all know what these kids are going through. It doesn't matter if they're in our classroom or not. We care about them...we don't really care about fractions because...if the kid's hungry, if the kid is sad because mom left them and hasn't seen them in two months, the kid wants to feel safe, the kids wants to feel like they belong somewhere. Our job is to make sure they feel safe and they feel included and that they have value...we are moms and dads. We play that role...'

(Focus group, teachers)

Teachers and parents

Generally speaking, there tends to be little communication between parents and teachers. Many teachers complained of unreturned telephone calls from parents, difficulty in obtaining signed forms including those needed for referrals, ADCFC counselling and school trips among other things, and not being informed of changes to routines:

'Primary students are...not picked up on time...The child is left sitting on a bench and someone is supposed to come and pick him [up]. Or mom will say, "well let [him/her] walk home, walk through the schoolyard", but as teachers we can't allow that because it's not safe. So that's a challenge...when they start changing things we need to know. And they won't call the school or they don't write a letter and then we'll call to figure out what's going on'.

(Focus group, teachers)

Teachers felt that some reasons for parental disengagement might include: (i) parents feeling embarrassed and/or judged/criticized on their parenting skills; (ii) parents preferring to deny any social and/or academic problems; (iii) parents dealing with other issues; and (iv) parents are not understanding teachers' priorities. Teachers also expressed disappointment in situations where an unhappy child speaks to a parent who then contacts the shelter staff who telephones the school. Teachers would prefer that a parent contact them directly:

'The parents themselves don't even come to you...like a regular parent would...They go through the shelter and sometimes it's made into a bigger thing because they've gone through the shelter instead of the parent just simply coming and asking'.

(Focus group, teachers)

Many parents stated that they had a positive relationship with teachers, including feeling welcome and maintaining consistent interaction through personal discussions and/or updates in the children's weekly agenda. However, a smaller number felt that they either had no or a negative relationship with the teacher, with some even feeling that teachers regarded both them and their children in a negative light:

'... We're irresponsible mothers and we're all crack heads and stuff like that...it comes from the teacher...Like people don't understand that we actually like have a home...we have a door with a lock. We have our own private space'.

(Focus group, parents)

It is clearly apparent that parent and teacher perceptions of their relationship are disjointed. An increase in efforts to foster greater communication is vital in order to ensure that a child's emotional, psychological and social needs are most effectively met.

Schools and shelters

Teachers and administrators expressed great satisfaction at having a designated Shelter-School Liaison Worker as it greatly increases communication between schools and shelters. For instance, the Shelter-School Liaison Worker from Red Door Family Shelter works with the neighbouring school to provide children with emotional, social and academic support; information about the child, including special needs; and potential timelines for the children's departure. Children are constantly reminded to bring in their homework as well as any necessary forms. The Worker also serves as the intermediary between the teacher and parent, who tend to have very little direct communication, and the liaison in terms of TDSB procedures; i.e. informing the school of procedures to follow in order to obtain vital supports for the child, and helping parents understand the reasoning behind why the school is seeking support services. Teachers at other participant schools frequently expressed the need for a liaison worker who could carry out similar tasks.

Teachers expressed the desire to have a more open relationship with the shelters, including visitations to the site. Some teachers have been invited in the past to visit two participant shelters and found the experience very enlightening:

'[We saw the] rooms with the double beds, people on top, cribs beside...that was where five or six of them were living. That was the biggest eye-opener for anybody...Just look at what this family is going through'.

(Focus group, teachers)

'...Many many many questions were answered when I saw...the room that the student in my class lives in with his mom, with these four children, with the suitcases, with the clothing and toiletries...Now I understand why he can't find his homework. It was quite a revelation...It was that occasion that I learned that [the shelter] had the homework club...And there were other things that I learned and just being able to see where the children live was a big help'.

(Focus group, teachers)

Some teachers felt that attending programs such as the shelter's breakfast club permitted them an opportunity to meet parents that they otherwise might not have met, and familiarized them with more of the children. Some teachers even found parents and children to be more receptive afterwards; i.e. parents were more willing to call the school/teacher for assistance and children were more inclined to open up.

Out of four participant schools, only one was currently working with a full-time Shelter-School Liaison Worker. Until June 2005, one participant school had a full-time liaison person, employed by the Child Development Institute, who would maintain contact with staff at the neighbouring shelter. Teachers at another school also referred to once having more communication with a shelter staff person, who would visit the school regularly to check on the children's progress, while another school did not have a liaison person yet still maintains a collaborative relationship with the nearby shelter. It is significant to note that teachers at all participant schools spoke of the

critical need for a liaison person who could foster a more consistent and cooperative relationship with the shelter.

Shelter staff did not elaborate on their relationship with the schools. They found teachers and administrators to be very helpful when contacted and/or approached, but did not maintain a very involved role at the schools.

School supports

Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre (ADCFC) offers the Helping Hands at School program in West Hill, Edgewood and Galloway Road Public Schools. This program provides direct service to children living in shelters for homeless families, consultation to school staff, and liaison with shelter staff and parents. Direct service is provided in a variety of ways depending on the school's specific needs; i.e. individual counselling, groups for children, etc. Areas of focus include social skill development, self-esteem, anger management, building resilience and reactions to being exposed to domestic violence³⁴. A Child and Youth Worker leads the program a few hours each week (i.e. 5 hours) per school.

All schools offer various programs and workshops in order to support their students, some of which are particularly effective for homeless children. For instance, West Hill and, more recently, Galloway Road Public Schools have student Ambassadors programs. Edgewood and Wexford Public Schools have more informal buddy systems. All of these efforts strive to facilitate students' social transition and inclusion, something that can be increasingly difficult for children with each new move.

Schools also provide a range of academic supports. For example, West Hill and Wexford offer after-school academic remediation programs. However, many children living in shelters do not attend these programs but rather participate in those offered at respective shelters. Participant schools also offer literacy programs to students, as many children struggle with their reading. According to one child participant:

'I'm starting to get better [with my classes]. I'm probably getting C's or B's...because they [school staff] put me on this subject called the Academy of Reading on their computer downstairs. We do it two times in one week...I learn more better how to read and then I learn more stuff'.

(Interview)

Some additional supports include, among others, TRIBES³⁵ (West Hill, Edgewood); English as a Second Language (ESL)/English Literacy Development (ELD) classes³⁶ (West Hill, Edgewood, Galloway Road); Settlement Education Partnerships (S.E.P.T.) (West Hill, Galloway Road); and

³⁴ The United Way of Greater Toronto funds the program.

³⁵ TRIBES is a process that is utilized to develop a positive learning and inclusive environment. Throughout the process, people learn to use specific collaborative skills and reflect on the interaction and learning that is taking place. TRIBES serves to establish a caring environment for cooperative learning and provides structure for positive interaction and continuity for working groups. It has been applied in classrooms, faculties, administrations and communities (Gibbs 2001).

³⁶ Wexford Public School provides ESL classes and team teaching with ESL/ELD staff.

social skills and leadership programs. Teachers will also provide students with necessary school materials including coloured pencils, pens and school books.

In addition to academic supports, schools offer students before/after school activities including interest groups and sports teams. However, the majority of participant children opt not to partake in these activities. Rather, they return to the shelter immediately after school. This is particularly true among students at one participant school, who are accompanied back to the shelter with the Shelter-School Liaison Worker.

In addition, the majority of children do not participate in extra-curricular activities, primarily because of high costs. Only one out of 31 participants reported having many extra-curricular sport and dance activities, many, if not all, of which were provided at the school³⁷. Such programs provide opportunities for children to become more involved with other children and teachers, and may also serve as venues for building trust and developing self-esteem. Some parents expressed frustration at the lack of extra-curricular supports:

'Extra-curricular activities and stuff like that...they're stripping so much away from everybody that there's basically no resources. There's nothing for children... What's going to happen when my kid hits grade 7 and can't read a word? What's going to happen when my child gets to grade 6 and can't have a regular conversation with a child without punching him out? What's going to happen when my child turns around and at 16 has his first girlfriend and beats her up? What's going to happen when...my kid walks into a convenience store and robs a 7/11 down the street from my home... We need to help... We need to stop this revolving door of just everything'.

(Focus group, parents)

³⁷ This school was not among those participating in this study.

Barriers to school success

High levels of transience and the accompanying uncertainty are some of the most significant barriers to school success. Homeless and low-income children suffer many of the same difficulties including overcrowded living conditions, lack of supports and resources and poor nutrition among other things. However, homeless children carry the extra burden of not knowing when they might be moving and to where:

'...People can only deal with so much at a time....kids...that are living in the shelter and come to school...they always know they're leaving. It's not like low rental [housing] where you are going to be in this apartment for a year or forever. Generally speaking [children living in shelters] know they are leaving. We know they are leaving. All of the other kids know they are leaving. So that whole mindset...when you walk into a [classroom] must be a huge challenge'.

(Focus group, teachers)

Changing schools precipitates delays and interruptions in a child's learning, and demands adjustment to a new environment and developing new friendships. Given the pronounced and prolonged stress to which they are already subjected, homeless children often lack the ability to continually (re)adapt to new and sudden circumstances. According to one teacher, children lack consistency; 'it seems to be all abrupt changes – like you're here [and] next week you're gone' (focus group, teachers).

Another challenge lies in the inability to access to the Ontario School Record (OSR) at the time of enrolment/registration. When a child has moved into a family shelter, the home (sending) school Principal will inform anyone with legal access to information about the student that the student is absent and his/her whereabouts unknown. The appropriate attendance counselling coordinator will be informed that the student is residing in a shelter. The student will be kept on the school register until the OSR is requested. Once the child is registered in a new school, the receiving school will maintain the student on a temporary register until the student is officially transferred. When the child has spent at least fifteen consecutive school days in the shelter, the receiving school principal will request the OSR from the sending school through the office of the appropriate Executive Superintendent – School Services, NW, SW, NE or SE, who will then forward it to the receiving school. As such, the sending and receiving schools have no direct contact. The purpose of this process is to ensure that the sending school not be placed in a compromising position regarding any lawful inquiries which could jeopardize the safety of family members (TDSB 2002). Paradoxically, despite these procedures, participant teachers admitted to being able to access the student's new whereabouts, not records, on the TDSB Trillium database by simply typing in the child's name. Thus a system designed to protect the students is actually serving to hinder them:

'....Sometimes [not having the OSR at registration] places the child at a real disadvantage because...maybe they were in a smaller group setting [before] or maybe they were getting extra support... We can't phone the other school and hurry the OSR here or phone the other school and get some information. We're kind of at a disadvantage as far as teaching is involved, but definitely the child is at a disadvantage being placed in a classroom without support they need'.

(Focus group, teachers)

Lack of space, privacy and computers for study coupled with high noise levels are additional challenges that were identified as barriers to school success. These and other stress factors impede children from focusing on homework assignments, ultimately compromising their academic performance. Poor grades only serve to lower the children's already damaged self-esteem, which in turn impacts their ability for emotional and social success.

Additional barriers to school success that were highlighted include extensive waiting lists for special supports and programs, lack of appropriate gym/sport equipment, inadequate nutrition and shortage of basic things such as season-appropriate clothing/footwear.

IV. Recommendations

Homelessness and poverty continue to impact adults and children nationwide at alarming rates. Despite a significant drop from 2001 to 2002, the number of two-parent families accessing shelter remains close to three times higher than it was in 1990, while that of one-parent families, primarily mother-led, continues to rise. Rather than a decrease in the actual need for family shelters, the decline in the overall number of two-parent families accessing shelters may be related to longer shelter stays for families unable to afford the cost of market rents and unable to access social housing. Poverty, inability to pay rent, family breakdown, violence against women, social isolation, substance abuse, psychiatric illness and maternal depression are among the primary reasons accounting for family homelessness.

The effect of homelessness on children is extreme. Homeless children exhibit significant rates of externalizing behavioural problems (e.g. aggression, hyperactivity and anti-social behaviour), internalizing behavioural/emotional problems (e.g. anxiety, excessive fears, depression) and developmental delays. Despite sharing many problems with other children living in poverty such as poor nutrition, inappropriate living conditions and shortage of basic needs, homeless children face additional stresses associated with residential instability, related family disturbances and school disruptions.

Shelter life, though beneficial to residents in many ways, possesses its own stresses. Children are directly affected by the lack of quiet private spaces, negative impacts of congregate living on parenting and the mother/child relationship, and the stigma of being homeless. Comprehensive solutions that serve the well-being of the entire family are vital.

As reflected in much American-based research, homeless children have unique problems that create barriers to accessing educational and other basic services, even when such services are readily available. Homelessness and school success, viz. academic achievement, sense of belonging, and emotional, social and behavioural well-being, are inextricably linked. Nevertheless, virtually no Canadian research exists specifically examining this issue. The present study strives to fill this gap, highlighting barriers to school success as identified by school age going children, parents, shelter staff and teachers/administrators.

Homeless children, like all homeless peoples, are not a homogenous group. Families seek shelter for various reasons including eviction and abuse. Different peoples require distinct supports to assist them in overcoming adversity and enabling them to move forward with their lives. The following recommendations are directed to governments, school boards, shelters and community agencies with an aim to improve homeless children's educational experience and outcomes, and

assist policy makers and implementers, parents and the community in facilitating children's access to available social services.

- Funding should be increased to hire additional staff in shelters with a specific role of supporting children's needs. In this study, a Shelter-School Liaison Worker, co-based at a school and shelter, was identified as a vital support, providing ongoing emotional, academic and social support to homeless students. The addition of a Shelter-School Liaison Worker may be of particular benefit to larger shelters with a significant number of school-age children. Smaller shelters may benefit from other types of child support workers. Additional supportive staffing roles may include the position of a community Transitional Outreach Coordinator for children. This person would work in conjunction with the Ex-Resident Program Coordinator for parents; work on supporting the parent-child relationship; provide counselling for children based on their specific histories; and monitor and advocate for the child. As well, additional funding could be used for shelter staff training focusing on the school system and school-related issues.
- School Boards should consider revising the policy surrounding the transfer of OSR records so that they might arrive to the receiving school with sufficient time to appropriately place the student, including providing all necessary accommodations, and enable teachers from receiving schools to contact those from sending schools.
- The City should act to remove any cap that limits the number of children living in a shelter who can be admitted to any neighbourhood school. While a cap may not have any practical impact, it carries with it a symbolic weight.
- Additional funding should be provided to schools to:
 - (i) Increase the number of Attendance Counsellors as a means of reducing absences and lateness
 - (ii) Engage a transition teacher(s) who could assess incoming students and recommend vital supports as quickly as possible
 - (iii) Ensure sufficient classroom supports so that teachers can effectively assist all students
- Increase staff and funding for shelters in efforts to:
 - (i) Expand cramped quarters and develop more quiet spaces for children
 - (ii) Offer programming for middle-years children
 - (iii) Engage more special needs assistance including translators and tutors
 - (iv) Provide all necessary school supplies as well as computers, computer software and ESL programs
 - (v) Increase access to external programs, such as recreation, for both parents and children
- In efforts to reduce the impact of transience and foster a sense of consistency, home schools should become more accommodating and encourage parents who have moved out of the area to keep their children enrolled in the same school. In order to facilitate children's continued attendance at a school after a move, access to school bus transportation is a requirement.

- The policies of individual schools as well as board-wide policies and practices should be revised to allow children living in shelters the option of continuing to attend the same school that they attended prior to moving into the shelter.
- Increase sensitivity and awareness of school superintendents, principals, teachers and administrators through education and training, such as in-house workshops, videos and literature, and opportunities for professional development. Areas of focus should include among others: (i) homelessness in Toronto; (ii) reasons for seeking shelter accommodation and information about daily life within shelters; and (iii) barriers to school success. This training should be delivered by individuals with direct experience of the shelter system and issues faced by homeless families, such as shelter workers or the Hostel Training Centre.
- Schools, shelters and community agencies should collaborate to educate school children and the community about homeless shelters in efforts to ameliorate their negative image.
- School superintendents should explore the possibility of developing a broad network of principals who could provide invaluable guidance for new principals and/or those dealing with homelessness and transience for the first time. Such a network could enable principals from sending schools to speak in confidence with those from receiving schools in order to ensure that all children receive necessary supports³⁸.
- Increase communication and collaboration between schools and shelters through training workshops and cooperative programs such as shelter tours and breakfast programs.
- Schools should consider implementing formalized buddy systems, such as the Ambassador's Club, and extend September's welcoming activities to periods following Christmas and spring break in order to facilitate the social and emotional transition for children arriving mid-year.
- School personnel should make greater efforts at increasing outreach and education to parents, including potential meetings at shelters, as a means of increasing communication, promoting inclusion, and providing parents with tools for supporting their children's school success.
- Educational materials on homelessness and school success should be included in Teacher's College curricula so that graduates might be able to effectively recognize and work with homeless children.
- Recognizing the additional burdens that homelessness and poverty place on parents, parenting support programs should be made available to homeless families.
- Conduct citywide research examining the educational needs of homeless children and the links between homelessness and school success in order to provide a more

³⁸ This recommendation stems from suggestions put forward by the school principal in Jane Addams Elementary School in Fresno, California. According to Principal Calderon, a principal's most important responsibility in dealing with transience is to build and maintain close links with district and community agencies, a network which should include district principals (Kesner 2002)

comprehensive understanding of barriers impacting homeless children in different demographic areas.

- While this study has focussed on supporting the school success of homeless children, we recognize the critical need to take action against the systemic inequities that result in homelessness among families with children. To this end, we recommend:
 - Action on the parts of all levels of government to dramatically expand affordable housing programs in Canada to realize the right to housing for all.
 - Increases to social assistance, disability support and minimum wage rates to ensure that individuals and families can meet their basic needs, live in dignity and that no woman should be forced to choose between abuse and poverty.
 - The implementation of the Gillian Hadley Inquest jury recommendations (see Chief Coroner Province of Ontario 2002) as a means of taking systemic action to prevent and respond to violence against women.

All levels of government must move beyond commitments to action.

Appendix A – Special thanks

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