

# WITHOUT A HOME: THE NATIONAL YOUTH HOMELESSNESS SURVEY

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## *Executive Summary*

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Canadian  
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Homelessness  
[homelesshub.ca](http://homelesshub.ca)  
REPORT #14



A WAY HOME  
VERS UN CHEZ-SOI  
CANADA



THE HOME  
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FOUNDATION



The  
Orange  
Door  
Project  
Housing and hope  
for homeless youth

# WITHOUT A HOME:

## The National Youth Homelessness Survey

**Stephen Gaetz, Bill O’Grady, Sean Kidd, Kaitlin Schwan**

COH RESEARCH REPORT #14

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Also supporting this research was **A Way Home Canada**, a national coalition to prevent and end youth homelessness.

This research would not have been possible without the dedicated work of the **National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness**, and 57 youth-serving agencies across the country, all of whom actively engaged young people to complete the survey. Deep collaboration with our partners made this work possible and forms the backbone of this study.

Most importantly, the authors would like to thank the young people with lived experience for taking part and lending their voices to our study.



## YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

continues to be a seemingly intractable problem in Canada. We believe there are solutions, and that means leveraging the best knowledge we have to do things differently.

The *Without a Home* study is the first pan-Canadian study of young people who experience homelessness. With 1,103 respondents from 47 different communities across 10 provinces and territories, this study's sample size has enabled us to conduct detailed analyses and to draw important conclusions.

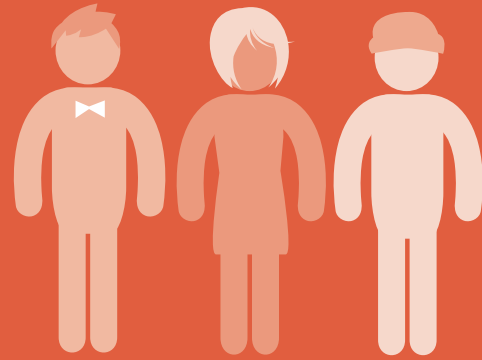
*Without a Home* demonstrates that with respect to youth homelessness, we are waiting much too long to intervene. In many jurisdictions, services for young people who experience homelessness are not available until they are 16 or even 18. The evidence presented here suggests that by that time, a lot of damage has already occurred.

In this report, we outline the need for a prevention-focused approach that prioritizes systems integration and Housing First for Youth (HF4Y). Our current systems tend to focus on the provision of supports downstream, when young people are much older. Rather than focusing on preventing the problem or reducing the negative outcomes of youth homelessness, we are more likely to wait for a major rupture or crisis, or when the problems facing the youth become much more acute. This report vividly demonstrates the suffering caused by this approach: housing precarity, violence, marginalization, health challenges, and social exclusion.

**By failing to implement more effective strategies to address youth homelessness, we are undermining the human rights of these youth.**

If we really want better outcomes for young people, we must do better. This survey provides policy makers, service providers, researchers, and the general public with some important baseline information about youth homelessness in Canada. The challenge we face now is mobilizing this knowledge to ensure that each and every young person has access to housing, safety, education, and supports.

**Young people who are homeless (ages 13-24) make up approximately 20% of the homeless population in Canada (Gaetz et al., 2014).**



Over the course of the year there are between 35,000–40,000 young people who experience homelessness, and on any given night between 6,000–7,000.

**57.6%**  
identified  
as male

**36.4%**  
identified  
as female

**29.5%**  
*identified as  
LGBTQ2S*

**30.6%**  
*identified as  
Indigenous*

**28.2%**  
*identified as members of  
racialized communities*

**1.8%**  
*identified as  
transgender*

**1.8%**  
*identified as  
two-spirit*

**2.5%**  
*identified as  
gender non-binary*

**10.1%**  
*were born  
outside Canada*



# BECOMING HOMELESS: PATHWAYS INTO HOMELESSNESS FOR YOUTH

For youth, the pathways into homelessness are complex. To address youth homelessness in Canada, we need to understand the intersecting individual, relational, institutional, and structural factors that cause some youth to lose their housing. Four key findings of this study help us understand how youth become homeless.

## 1. Early Experiences of Homelessness

**Many homeless youth became homeless before they were 16, and youth who leave home at a younger age experience greater adversity on the streets.**

For many young people, their first experience of homelessness occurs well before they are entitled to access interventions and supports. Strikingly, 40.1% of participants reported that they were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness. Importantly, our findings show that youth who leave home at an earlier age not only experience increased hardship before they become homeless, but they also experience greater adversity once on the streets.

**40.1%**

*were younger than 16 when they first experienced homelessness*

THOSE WHO LEAVE HOME AT AN EARLY AGE ARE MORE LIKELY TO:

- Experience multiple episodes of homelessness
- Be involved with child protection services
- Be tested for ADHD
- Experience bullying
- Be victims of crime once homeless, including sexual assault
- Have greater mental health and addictions symptoms
- Experience poorer quality of life
- Attempt suicide
- Become chronically homeless

## 2. Housing Instability

**Homeless youth often have multiple episodes of homelessness and experience housing instability for years prior to their current experience of homelessness.**

Youth reported a high degree of housing instability prior to their current experience of homelessness. In fact, only 24.1% reported they had been homeless once, meaning that 75.9% had experienced multiple episodes. Amongst those who had multiple experiences of homelessness, 63% had between two and five experiences, and more than one third (37%) had more than five experiences.

Importantly, youth who left home before they were 16 were much more likely to experience multiple episodes of homelessness, with just 13.7% reporting only one experience of homelessness. Of those with multiple experiences (86.7%), a shocking 50% (49.8%) reported five or more episodes. Groups that also reported higher rates of multiple experiences included transgender and gender non-binary youth (82.8%), LGBTQ2S youth (80.2%), and Indigenous youth (80.4%).

**24.1%**

*reported being homeless only once*

**75.9%**

*had experienced multiple episodes of homelessness*

**36.9%**

*had more than five experiences of homelessness*

TRANSGENDER AND LGBTQ2S YOUTH ARE MORE LIKELY TO LEAVE HOME AT AN EARLY AGE. THESE YOUTH ARE ALSO MUCH MORE LIKELY TO REPORT PARENTAL CONFLICT AND CHILDHOOD PHYSICAL, SEXUAL, AND/OR EMOTIONAL ABUSE AS CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THEIR HOMELESSNESS.

*“I feel worthless sometimes, the fact that I’m staying at a shelter. However, I feel a lot safer being shielded from the mental abuse from my parents.”*

YOUTH, 23

### 3. Involvement in Child Protection

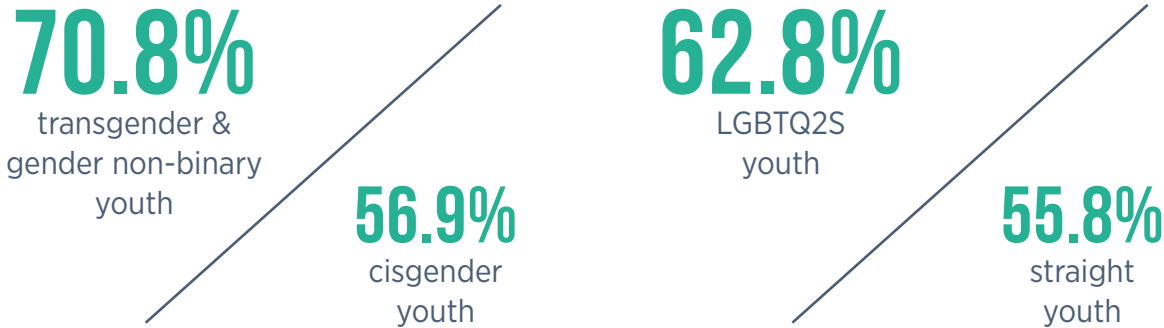
#### A high percentage of homeless youth experienced childhood abuse and involvement with child protection services, often beginning at a very young age.

A high percentage of young people in our sample (63.1%) experienced childhood trauma and abuse. A total of 51.1% reported experiencing physical abuse as a child or adolescent, 24% reported experiencing sexual abuse, and 47.5% reported experiencing other forms of violence and abuse. Given this, it shouldn't be a surprise that 57.8% of youth indicated that they had some kind of involvement with child protection services in the past. On average, youth became involved with child protection services at the age of 8.5, and for one third (31.5%) involvement began before the age of 6.

INDIGENOUS YOUTH (70.5%) WERE MORE LIKELY THAN YOUTH WHO WERE MEMBERS OF RACIALIZED COMMUNITIES (43.5%) AND WHITE YOUTH (55.1%) TO REPORT INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES. HOWEVER, IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT INDIGENOUS YOUTH, MEMBERS OF RACIALIZED COMMUNITIES, AND NEWCOMERS ARE NOT SIGNIFICANTLY MORE LIKELY TO REPORT CHILDHOOD ABUSE. OTHER FACTORS SUCH AS FAMILY CONFLICT, POVERTY AND DISCRIMINATORY POLICIES AND PRACTICES CAN PLAY A ROLE.

Youth who left home for the first time before the age of 16 were much more likely to report involvement with child protection services (73.3%). Transgender and gender non-binary youth were more likely to report child protection services involvement than cisgender youth (70.8% vs. 56.9%), and LGBTQ2S youth were more likely to report involvement with child protection services than straight youth (62.8% vs. 55.8%). Importantly, young people who experience forms of adversity prior to becoming homeless, such as child protection involvement, physical and sexual abuse, and neglect, were more likely to experience poorer mental health, suicide attempts, lower quality of life, and negative psychological resilience.

LIKELIHOOD OF INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES





## 4. Challenges in School

**Homeless youth have high drop out rates and experience numerous challenges in school, including bullying and difficulties related to learning disabilities.**

Homeless youth have challenging and disrupted academic trajectories, with bullying and learning disabilities impacting school engagement and achievement for these youth. Among study participants, 50% reported being tested for a learning disability while at school, indicating that school staff view these youth as suffering in some way. Importantly, those who had dropped out of school were much more likely to report learning disabilities (41.8%), ADHD (46.1%), and physical disabilities (47.9%). Strikingly, 83% of youth reported that they had experienced bullying at school either 'sometimes' (37%) or 'often' (46%). This means that homeless youth are approximately four times more likely to have experienced bullying than Canadian youth in general.

**50%**

*reported being tested  
for a learning disability*

**83%**

*reported they had  
experienced bullying  
at school*

## YOUTH'S EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS

As the largest pan-Canadian study on youth homelessness, this report offers the most comprehensive data to date on Canadian youth's *experiences* of homelessness. Our findings reveal seven key ways in which these youth are suffering:

- **Ongoing housing instability** – Participants reported housing instability both before they were homeless and once they were on the streets. Over half had stayed in more than one location the previous month, and 10.2% stayed in more than five places.

- **High levels of chronicity** – Almost one third of the young people (31.4%) in our study were chronically homeless, meaning they were continuously homeless for more than one year, and 21.8% were episodically homeless, reporting multiple experiences of homelessness over the past three years. Of those who are identified as chronically homeless, 60% reported being homeless for three years or more.
- **Nutritional vulnerability** – While 26.8% of youth reported having access to good quality food when they need it, almost half (46.3%) experienced this once a week or less. One of the consequences of this is that when asked if they have enough energy for everyday life, one third (34.7%) reported that they have little or no energy on a day-to-day basis.
- **Declining mental health** – A very high percentage of respondents (85.4%) reported high symptoms of distress. Within our sample, 42% of participants reported at least one suicide attempt and 35.2% reported having at least one drug overdose requiring hospitalization. Exposure to street sexual and physical violence also made youth over three times as likely to experience high mental health risks.
- **Low school participation** – While the drop out rate in Canada now sits below 9%, for homeless youth the rate is 53.2%. Of those who dropped out, however, 73.9% would like to return to school.
- **Unemployment** – In our survey, three quarters (75.7%) of youth indicated they were unemployed, and only 19.7% currently had jobs. This is in contrast to an unemployment rate of 13.3% amongst youth in the general Canadian public. Strikingly, 50.5% of youth participants were not in employment, education, or training.
- **Criminal victimization** – While 19% of Canadians report being a victim of crime in any given year, 68.7% of our sample had been victims of a crime. Only 7.6% of Canadians report being the victim of a violent crime, compared with 59.6% of homeless youth who report violent victimization, including high rates of sexual assault. Young women (37.4%) and transgender/gender non-binary youth (41.3%) reported higher levels of sexual assault over the previous 12 months.

# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? ADDRESSING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

## Prevention

This report clearly demonstrates that with respect to youth homelessness, we are waiting much too long to intervene. We cannot end youth homelessness without stopping the flow into homelessness – this means focusing on prevention. It is clear that our efforts need to shift from a prolonged crisis response to ensuring that each young person’s experience of homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring. There are several key components to this work:

- **Family First** – Family First supports young people at risk of homelessness through family reconnection, using case management supports to help mediate conflicts, strengthen relationships, and nurture natural supports. This assists young people to remain in their communities, near schools, peers, and families.
- **Early intervention** – Place-based early intervention programs bring services and supports directly to young people through school, community centres, help lines, and centralized intake. Focused on intervening early for youth at risk, early intervention programs employ a case management approach that offers family supports, housing options, and educational and employment supports.

MANY HOMELESS YOUTH CYCLE IN AND OUT OF HOMELESSNESS, SCHOOL, AND WORK. WE MUST APPROACH *EACH ONE* OF THESE CYCLES AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PUT PREVENTION STRATEGIES IN PLACE AND LEVERAGE THE STRENGTHS OF THESE YOUTH.

- **School-community partnerships** – School-based prevention approaches can help the education system identify and quickly intervene when young people are at risk of homelessness or dropping out of school. These programs provide the necessary supports to reduce these risks, strengthen families, and keep youth in place. Typically based on collaborations between schools and local community services, these partnerships require a coordinated and strategic systems approach.



- **Transitional supports for young people leaving care** – To reduce the risk that young people transitioning from care become homeless, we need to do more than reform child protection laws or extend the age of care. Effective strategies must involve partnerships between government, child protection services, and experienced community-based service providers to transform the system for these youth.

## Housing First for Youth

Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) adapts the successful Housing First model to meet the needs of developing adolescents and young adults. As a program intervention, it means moving youth out of homelessness as quickly as possible with no preconditions. Young people are provided with a range of housing options, including returning home (with supports), supportive housing, transitional housing, and scattered site independent living. Key to this approach is that young people are provided with a range of supports that will help them maintain housing, learn life skills, have positive relationships with peers and adults, and re-engage with school, employment training, and/or employment. Shifting to HF4Y means providing homeless youth with the same housing and wrap-around supports that would help any young person make a successful transition to adulthood.

## Systems Integration

Our research findings demonstrate that the drivers of youth homelessness include family breakdown, interpersonal violence, housing instability, mental health and addictions issues, and problematic transitions from government institutions such as child protection. This means that the causes and conditions of youth homelessness touch on many key institutions in society, including healthcare, education, child protection, justice, and employment supports, all in addition to housing. To address youth homelessness, federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments must take an integrated systems approach from within government. In other words, youth homelessness cannot be tackled by a single ministry or department.

*“One of the problems about group homes are a lack of stability. It’s hard enough without being a human pinball.”*

MAN, 19

As opposed to a fragmented collection of services, an integrated systems response requires that programs, services, and service delivery systems are organized at every level – from policy, to intake, to service provision, to client flow – based on the needs of the young person.

A key way to implement an integrated systems response is to develop a community plan to prevent and end youth homelessness. The most effective approach is to use a ‘collective impact’ approach through engaging community leaders, service providers, institutions (e.g., health care, justice), different orders of government, funders, the non-profit and private sectors, and people affected by homelessness. In developing any plan to end youth homelessness, youth with lived experience must be part of the planning process.

#### **COMMUNITY PLANNING**

A COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY PLAN TO PREVENT AND END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IS ONE THAT IS *INCLUSIVE* IN ITS PROCESS, *STRATEGIC* IN ITS OBJECTIVES, SETS REAL AND MEASURABLE *TARGETS FOR CHANGE*, IS *CLEAR* TO ALL STAKEHOLDERS, AND LEADS TO *REAL CHANGES* IN YOUNG PEOPLE’S LIVES. A WAY HOME CANADA HAS DEVELOPED A COMPREHENSIVE **COMMUNITY PLANNING TOOLKIT** TO SUPPORT THIS WORK.

## Addressing Educational Challenges

Our report demonstrates a very high drop out rate among homeless youth, despite most of these youth wanting to attend school. More must be done to support young people who experience homelessness to reengage in school and achieve success. This includes ensuring that necessary supports are in place for those young people who are marginalized because of learning disabilities or bullying. Schools must provide programmatic supports for youth who are experiencing homelessness, as well as coordinate with community agencies to ensure that youth have the supports needed to quickly exit homelessness. If we want positive, long-term benefits for young people who have experienced homelessness, we have to help them get back to school and succeed in the school system.

## Fostering Resilience and Mental Health Supports

Our report documents the severe mental health risks that youth without housing face in Canada. However, our data also reveals that homeless youth have remarkable resources. We must foster the resilience of these youth, leverage their assets, and mitigate the mental health risks posed by life on the streets. Key recommendations include:

- We must intervene *before* youth become homeless given the strong connections between mental health risk, child protection involvement, and exposure to violence prior to becoming homelessness.
- We must *rapidly* mobilize early interventions for youth given that the longer youth are on the streets, the worse their mental health outcomes.
- Mental health supports for racialized and Indigenous youth must be culturally relevant and account for the systemic discrimination faced by these groups.
- We must develop interventions that are tailored to meet the high mental health risks experienced by LGBTQ2S youth. Tailored approaches might include connecting youth with LGBTQ2S-positive communities and spaces.
- Services must be developed to address the unique and greater needs female youth are facing.

Perhaps most importantly, our findings highlight that mental health and addictions issues among homeless youth are driven by experiences of violence, marginalization, and poverty. If we hope to address these mental health challenges, we must address the structural and systemic drivers of youth homelessness.

## Fortifying Natural Supports

Positive relations with family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and meaningful adults are all assets that help young people move into adulthood in a healthy way. Our study found that many homeless youth stay connected with these ‘natural supports’ while homeless, and that these supports are important to them. Many youth indicated they want improved relationships with family members. It is important that those helping young people who are homeless see the value in helping young people reconnect with their families and communities. These connections can be instrumental in helping young people survive on the streets and move out of homelessness.



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

## Government of Canada

1. The Government of Canada should implement a Youth Homelessness Strategy supported by a targeted investment.
2. The Prime Minister, as the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Youth, should convene an Inter-Ministerial planning and coordination table.

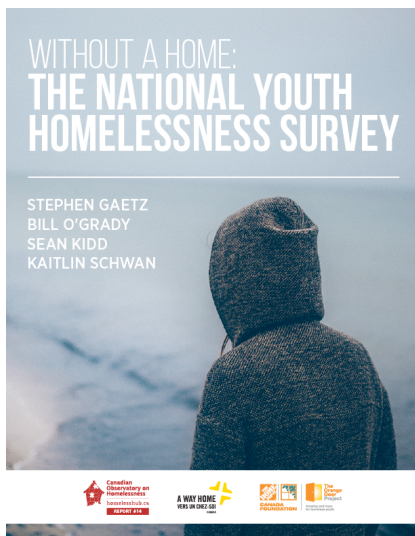
## Provincial and Territorial Governments

1. All provincial and territorial governments should implement targeted strategies to prevent and end youth homelessness as part of their broader homelessness strategies.
2. Focus strategy on supporting young people who are under 16 and are at risk of homelessness.
3. Ensure young people who are transitioning from child protection services are supported in a way that ensures housing stability and ongoing support.
4. Provincial Ministries of Justice, Corrections, and the Attorney General should address youth homelessness.
5. Provincial Ministries of Education should be mandated to support early intervention strategies to prevent youth homelessness.
6. Provincial Ministries of Health should ensure that young people and their families have adequate supports for mental health and addictions challenges.

## Communities and Municipalities

1. All communities and/or municipalities should plan and implement strategies to prevent and end youth homelessness.
2. Communities should focus on prevention and strategies to move young people out of homelessness instead of expanding emergency services.
3. Community strategies should focus on systems integration to facilitate smooth transitions from homelessness and ensure no young person slips through the cracks.

4. Community strategies should necessarily ensure that local and program responses take account of the needs of priority populations.
5. Enable all young people who experience homelessness to reengage with education and training.
6. Make 'family reconnect' supports available to all young people who come in contact with the system.
7. Housing First for Youth should be broadly applied as both a community philosophy and as a program intervention.
8. In working with young people, communities should focus not just on risks, but assets and resilience.
9. Mental health and addictions needs of young people should be prioritized in community planning and service delivery.
10. Foster meaningful youth engagement in all policy development, planning, and implementation processes.



**DOWNLOAD**

*Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey at:*

[www.homelesshub.ca/YouthWithoutHome](http://www.homelesshub.ca/YouthWithoutHome)