The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness

Executive Summary

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How to Cite

Acknowledgements

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is time for a new approach to youth homelessness - one that is proactive, not reactive.

Our emergency-focused response has meant that we largely respond only after a young person is on the streets. As a consequence, young people experience profound avoidable suffering that shapes the rest of their lives. In underlined consultations across the country, young people were resolute: we are waiting too long to intervene when a young person is at risk or experiencing homelessness.

The *Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness* is designed to support a paradigm shift by helping service providers, policy makers, communities, advocates, and researchers to better understand the meaning of youth homelessness prevention. The *Roadmap* provides both a clear definition and a common language for prevention policy and practice. It is built upon a national consultation with youth experiencing homelessness (Schwan et al., 2018), international engagement on where and how youth homelessness prevention operates elsewhere, an exhaustive literature review, consultations with communities (including the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness), and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness' conceptual framework of *A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention*.

The *Roadmap* also provides a useful, detailed guide outlining evidence-based and evidence-informed program areas that will help communities and governments implement plans to prevent and end youth homelessness. The *Roadmap* offers guidance on the following questions:

> What is youth homelessness prevention, and what is it not?

> Who is responsible for youth homelessness prevention?

> What are systems approaches to prevention?

> What program areas and interventions exist?

> What is the evidence for youth homelessness prevention?

Above all, the *Roadmap* aims to bring Canada much closer to the realizable goal of ending youth homelessness.

Why Prevention?

Prevention is generally accepted as more effective and desirable than waiting for complex problems to spiral out of control before intervening. Unfortunately, in North America the notion of preventing the problem of homelessness is not well understood and has not yet gained traction in policy, practice, or investment. For many years, crisis responses to homelessness have been relied upon to meet the immediate survival needs of young people who experience homelessness through emergency shelters, day programs, and law enforcement. **This reliance on crisis responses, while well-meaning, has not produced the outcomes we want.** There has been no demonstrable decrease in the number of young people that end up on the street, and young people who are homeless continue to suffer tremendously, experiencing violence, nutritional vulnerability, mental health crises, isolation, and discrimination. The pan-Canadian *Without a Home* study (Gaetz et al., 2016) brought to light an ongoing crisis, revealing that among youth experiencing homelessness:

›   40.1% were under the age of 16 when they first experienced homelessness;

›   76% had multiple experiences of homelessness, with 37% of these youth reporting more than five experiences;

›   85.4% were experiencing a mental health crisis, with 42% reporting at least one suicide attempt;

›   38% of young women reported a sexual assault in the previous 12 months;

›   57.8% had involvement with child welfare involvement;

›   63.1% had experienced childhood trauma and abuse;

›   51% were not currently involved in either education, employment, or training; and

›   Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, and LGBTQ2S+ youth are overrepresented in homeless youth populations across Canada.

A number of important conclusions can be drawn from these numbers:

First, we are waiting far too long to intervene when young people are at risk of homelessness, or experiencing homelessness.

Second, experiencing homelessness for any length of time can have a devastating impact on the health, safety, mental health and well-being of young people.

Third, some young people experiencing homelessness – particularly Indigenous youth, LGBTQ2S+ youth, newcomer youth, and young women - experience the additional burden of ongoing discrimination and bias-based violence and exclusion.

Fourth, emergency responses on their own do not prevent homelessness, or necessarily help youth exit homelessness rapidly. Relying on such a crisis-based approach does not offer an effective or adequate solution to the problem of youth homelessness, and we therefore cannot and should not expect young people to "bootstrap" themselves out of homelessness.

Fifth, our public systems are failing to prevent young people from entering homelessness. For example, youth experiencing homelessness are 193 times more likely to have child welfare involvement than the general population (Nichols et al., 2017). It is clear that we are missing many opportunities to prevent youth homelessness within public systems.

Finally, people with lived experience of youth homelessness strongly profess the need to shift from the crisis response to a focus on prevention and sustainable exits from homelessness. In a recent national consultation conducted by the COH and AWHC, youth stated that "by building a response that is primarily reactive, we not only condemn youth to hardship and trauma, we actually ensure it" (Schwan et al., 2018, p. 122).

The time has come to shift to a proactive, rather than reactive, response to the problem of youth homelessness.

Defining Youth Homelessness Prevention

Despite broad political and community-based interest in youth homelessness prevention, there has been lack of clarity about what it entails. We offer the following definition of youth homelessness prevention:

> ***Youth homelessness prevention*** *refers to policies, practices, and interventions that either (1) reduce the likelihood that a young person will experience homelessness, or (2) provide youth experiencing homelessness with the necessary supports to stabilize their housing, improve their wellbeing, connect with community, and avoid re-entry into homelessness. Youth homelessness prevention thus necessitates the **immediate provision** of housing and supports for youth experiencing homelessness, or the **immediate protection** of housing, with supports, for youth at risk of homelessness. Youth homelessness prevention must be applied using a rights-based approach and address the unique needs of developing adolescents and young adults.*

This definition is adapted from Gaetz and Dej's (2017) broader [definition of homelessness prevention](#), drawing into focus policies and practices that are responsive to the distinct challenges that young people face. In implementing youth homelessness prevention, governments and communities should seek out evidence-based and promising interventions and policies that are both developmentally and individually tailored.

A Typology of Youth Homelessness Prevention

To conceptualize types of homelessness prevention for youth, *The Roadmap for Youth Homelessness Prevention* builds on the typology within *A New Direction: A Framework for Homelessness Prevention*. This typology articulates a range of preventative activities that aim to stabilize housing, improve health and wellbeing, promote social inclusion, and contribute to better long-term outcomes for youth and their families.

1. Structural Prevention
2. Systems Prevention
3. Early Intervention
4. Eviction Prevention
5. Housing Stabilization

Duty to Assist

Ending Youth Homelessness
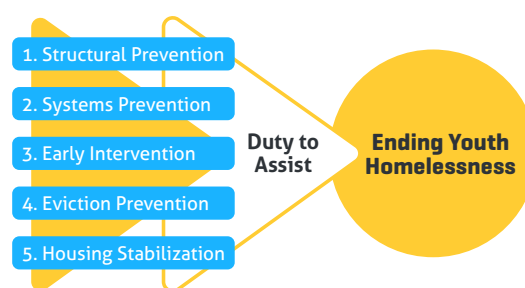
Homelessness Prevention Typology

1
STRUCTURAL PREVENTION

"Structural prevention addresses structural and systemic factors that contribute to housing precarity and social exclusion, exposing some individuals and families to a greater risk of homelessness" (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 47).

Structural prevention can be aimed at the entire population, or may involve targeted solutions for groups who face a higher risk of homelessness (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ youth) (Gaetz et al., 2016). Structural prevention typically involves implementing policies, legislation, and interventions that increase housing stability, economic security, and social inclusion. This might involve raising the rates of social assistance, lowering the cost of public transportation, or ensuring access to appropriate and affordable housing and health care. In the *Roadmap*, 8 key forms of structural prevention of youth homelessness are outlined:

1) Poverty Reduction
2) Increasing the Availability of Affordable Housing
3) Addressing Inequity and Discrimination
4) Structural Prevention of Homelessness for Indigenous Youth
5) Breaking the Link Between Youth Homelessness, Migration, and Displacement
6) Promoting Social Inclusion for All Youth
7) Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences
8) Youth Homelessness Prevention Legislation & Policy

2

SYSTEMS PREVENTION

Systems prevention of youth homelessness involves identifying and addressing policies, programs, and practices within public systems that present barriers for young people to access supports and expose young people to the risk of homelessness. Youth homelessness prevention should involve restructuring our public systems to *decrease* a young person's likelihood of homelessness, and *increase* their chances of health, safety, self-determination, education, meaningful employment, belonging, and housing stability. In order to be effective, youth homelessness prevention must address the "institutional and systems failures that either indirectly or directly contribute to the risk of homelessness" (Gaetz & Dej, 2017, p. 44).

Systems prevention of youth homelessness involves three primary domains:

1) Transition supports for youth exiting public institutions and systems, including for youth leaving care, corrections, and healthcare settings.

2) Enhancing youths' ability to equitably access and benefit from public systems, supports, and entitlements. This can be achieved by improving "The Four 'A's":

   » Availability
   » Access
   » Affordability
   » Appropriateness

Exiting Systems

Youth Leaving Care

Youth Exiting Corrections

Youth Exiting Mental Health/Addictions Services

3) Improving youths' experiences and outcomes in public systems, including by:

   ❯ Tackling discrimination and inequity in public systems;
   ❯ Embedding youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination in public systems;
   ❯ Responding to abuse and neglect in public systems; and
   ❯ Addressing silos and gaps within and between government funded departments and systems, and also within non-profit sectors.
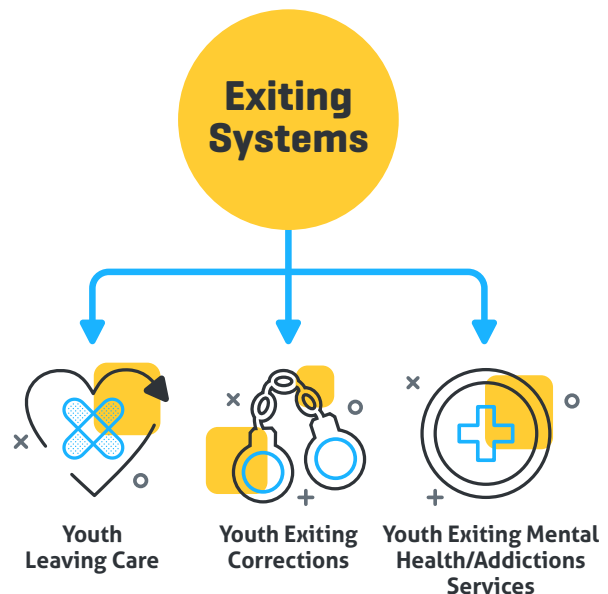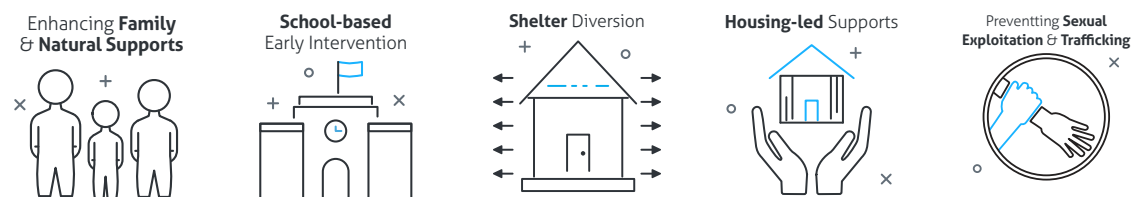
3
EARLY INTERVENTION

Early intervention refers to strategies designed to act early and address the risk of homelessness, provide young people and their families with necessary supports, and importantly enhance resilience while reducing the potential for negative outcomes (Gaetz, 2014).

Such strategies focus on addressing the physical, emotional, material, interpersonal, social, and educational needs of young people who are at imminent risk of homelessness, or who have just entered into homelessness.

A positive youth development orientation must guide service delivery to help young people return home or move into new accommodations in a safe and planned way, with supports for themselves and their families. Fostering positive youth development also includes the use of strengths-based assessment tools.

Early intervention strategies should involve programs and supports that strengthen protective factors amongst adolescents by enhancing engagement with school, nurturing family and natural supports, and building their problem-solving and conflict resolution skills.

Five key forms of early intervention described in the Roadmap include:

Enhancing **Family** & **Natural Supports**

School-based Early Intervention

Shelter Diversion

Housing-led Supports

Preventting **Sexual Exploitation** & **Trafficking**

These program areas are evidence-based and implemented both domestically and abroad. An integrated 'system of care' needs to be in place to facilitate effective early interventions, thus improving a young person's chance of avoiding homelessness.

In addition to these program models, early intervention should involve preventing sexual exploitation and trafficking. Young people experiencing sex trafficking are necessarily experiencing homelessness, even if they are 'housed.' Youth homelessness prevention must include targeted early intervention efforts to prevent sex trafficking for both housed and unhoused youth, as well as effective approaches to stabilize youths' housing once they exit a trafficking situation.

4

EVICTIONS PREVENTION

Eviction prevention refers to any program, policy, intervention, or strategy aimed at keeping young people or their families in their home with security of tenure, thereby preventing them from entering into homelessness (Gaetz & Dej, 2016; Poppe & Gale, 2018).

Eviction prevention is a form of both *early intervention* and *housing stabilization* for young people.

Eviction is not simply an event, but the outcome of a process defined by Canadian law and legislation. There are various points within the evictions process where an intervention could help a young person avoid losing their home. In order to be effective, multiple forms of eviction prevention should be available, accessible, affordable, and appropriate for all young people and their families.

There are five forms of eviction prevention that should be part of any youth homelessness prevention strategy:

1) Strengthening Laws and Legislation Protecting Tenants

2) Provision of Information and Advice for Youth and Their Families

3) Provision of Financial Supports for Tenants

4) Access to Legal Supports, Advice, and Representation

5) Targeted and Timely Crisis Intervention

5
HOUSING STABILIZATION

Housing stabilization is a form of tertiary prevention which involves supporting young people who have already experienced homelessness and housing precarity to exit that situation as quickly as possible, with the necessary supports in place to ensure they do not cycle back into homelessness. Housing stabilization is also a goal of early intervention.

It is necessary to consider a range of outcomes when implementing housing stabilization interventions that look beyond housing status and focus more broadly on well-being, building assets, strengthening resilience, and enhancing social inclusion.

The *Housing First for Youth* model identifies key outcome areas that should be part of any housing stabilization strategy, including:

1) Housing supports

2) Supports for health and wellbeing

3) Access to income and education

4) Complementary supports

5) Enhancing social inclusion

Duty to Assist – A Rights-Based Approach

In consideration of the human rights of young people, the *Roadmap* adds an additional strategy that builds upon and extends the five elements of the typology: Duty to Assist. A Duty to Assist combines a statutory responsibility to help youth at risk with an obligation to ensure that adults in the lives of young people are able to provide supports to help youth avoid homelessness, or direct them to services and supports that can do so. A Duty to Assist is an integrated systems responses to homelessness, involving homelessness services and public systems' responses, early intervention approaches, and models of accommodation and support that lead to better outcomes for vulnerable youth. While not yet in existence in Canada, it is a model that should be aspired to.

6
A DUTY TO ASSIST

Implementing a statutory Duty to Assist means that the Canadian government has a **legal duty** to ensure that young people are provided with information, advice, and housing-led supports to avoid an experience of homelessness, or to make that experience as brief as possible. This statutory duty is not met by referring a young person to an emergency shelter or other homelessness services, but requires ending the person's experience of homelessness or stabilizing their housing.

A rights-based approach to youth homelessness, Duty is Assist is legally enforceable and judiciable, providing a young person with the opportunity for legal recourse if the state fails to take reasonable steps to prevent their homelessness. Duty to Assist legislation identifies and articulates jurisdictional responsibilities within and between different orders of government in order to ensure any young person who is referred for assistance (including through self-referral) is provided with the appropriate supports, information, and advice to remain housed, or quickly become re-housed.

These six elements work in concert to prevent youth homelessness. These approaches span upstream efforts focused on structural prevention, to systems approaches that improve experiences in public institutions, to early interventions and housing stabilization efforts that reduce the risk of homelessness and prevent young people from cycling back into homelessness.

To bring prevention to life, each sector, order of government, community, practitioner, and caring individual must make the commitment to wholeheartedly and relentlessly pursue this new vision for young people in Canada, aligning their collective strengths, knowledge, and resources to move from vision to reality.
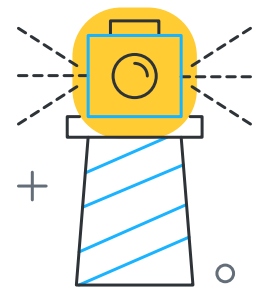
Who is Responsible for Youth Homelessness Prevention?

In discussing the range of programs, policies, and approaches that can support the prevention of youth homelessness, it is critical to delineate responsibility. We must clarify when the homelessness sector should play a leading role, and when other institutions and orders of government carry the main responsibility. Youth homelessness prevention cannot solely rely on the homelessness system's funding and services. Rather, cross-systems and whole government approaches are required to achieve lasting change for young people.

Young people across the country articulated that youth homelessness prevention requires changes in multiple public systems (Schwan et al., 2018a), including housing, criminal justice, child welfare, healthcare, and education. Prevention work requires improved collaboration and coordination between and within ministries, departments, and communities, along with investment, policy development and alignment, and leadership from all orders of government.

Youth homelessness prevention cannot solely rely on the homelessness system's funding and services. Rather, cross-systems and whole government approaches are required to achieve lasting change for young people.

Most importantly, this shift requires that we redefine who is viewed as responsible for youth homelessness prevention. It is time to collaborate with the systems and sectors that youth are engaged with *prior* to becoming homeless, leveraging each system interaction to improve a young person's housing stability, wellness, and other positive outcomes.

To do so, we must implement structures that support mutual engagement in—and accountability to—one another's work and the changes we all want to see: better outcomes for youth.

A Human Rights Approach To Youth Homelessness

Youth homelessness prevention work must be grounded in the fundamental human rights of young people in Canada. Canada is a signatory to a number of international human rights agreements that define rights relevant to homeless youth, including:
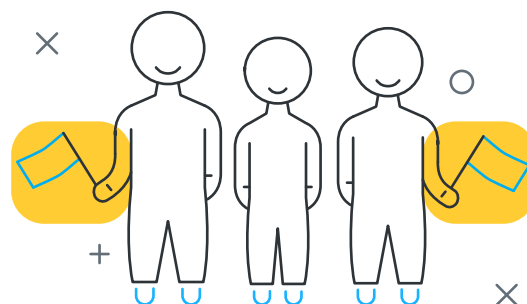
> **Right to adequate standard of living**

> **Right to adequate housing**

> **Right to adequate food**

> **Right to work**

> **Right to health**

> **Right to education**

> **Right to personal security & privacy**

> **Right of equal access to justice**

> **Right to assembly**

> **Right to freedom of expression**

> **Right to life**

(Canada Without Poverty & A Way Home Canada, 2016)

That youth homelessness exists in Canada, and that we allow young people to remain trapped in homelessness, represents a *denial* of basic human rights. As a human rights violation, youth homelessness must be remedied.
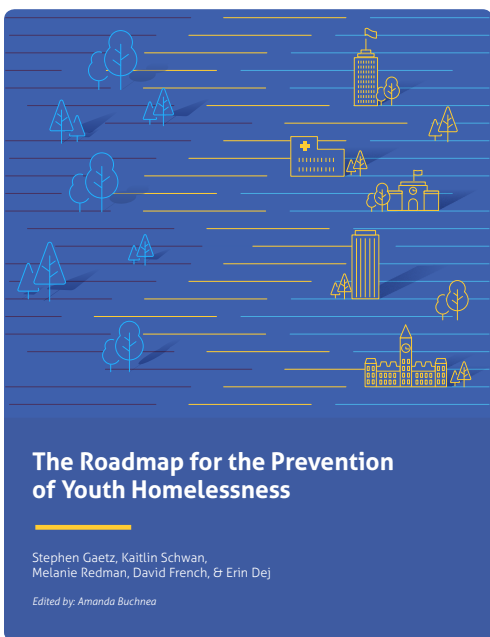
Practically, this means that policies, laws, and strategies aimed at youth homelessness prevention must be grounded in human rights at all stages of development, implementation, and evaluation.

A Call To Action - Implementing Prevention Across Canada

The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness is put forward with the intention of beginning a national conversation on what youth homelessness prevention could look like in Canada. We can no longer ignore the existing opportunities for implementing prevention policies and practices across Canada. If we, as a society, want a system that produces better and longer-term outcomes for young people, we need to focus on preventing homelessness by intervening early to support youth and their families. This radical transformation will bring us closer to ending youth homelessness in Canada, and producing better and long-term outcomes for all young people.

We can no longer ignore the existing opportunities for implementing prevention policies and practices across Canada.

We can end youth homelessness, if we choose to.

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