



greater victoria
coalition to end
homelessness

hope has found a home

Youth Pathways

In and Out of Homelessness in the
Capital Region



COMMUNITY SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL
research·insights·solutions

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Introduction

The Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness (Coalition) is a partnership of local service providers, non-profit organizations, all levels of government, business and the faith community located in Greater Victoria, British Columbia. The Coalition's mission is to end homelessness by 2018.

In 2013, the Coalition developed a Research Priorities Plan that outlined research priorities to contribute to knowledge and solutions for ending homelessness. In recognition that research generates evidence of solutions to homelessness, the Plan posits a number of research questions organized into different themes. Youth were identified as a priority population group in the plan and the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria (CSPC) with the assistance of the Centre for Addictions Research of BC (CARBC) was commissioned to carry out this study. The study attempted to weave two questions/goals together:

- How many youth are experiencing homelessness in the Capital Regional District (CRD)?
- What are the pathways out of homelessness for youth?

The actual number of youth experiencing homelessness in the region proved to be difficult to determine for a number of reasons including:

- The fluid state of homelessness makes it difficult to determine a single, static number
- Many youth experiencing homelessness are difficult to locate in order to count them. These youth are couch surfing, moving back and forth from their family home, in and out of foster care, etc. Researchers made many attempts to work with schools and community organizations in order to outreach to these youth. Time and resources constraints, and service providers' legitimate concern for youths' privacy, and service providers' lack of resources and time to support the process (even if they wanted to help) made accessing youth more difficult.

However we know from the 2014 Facility Count that on one night in February 2014, there were 88 youth accessing seasonal emergency shelters, emergency shelters, transitional housing, and treatment services in the Capital Region (Albert et al, 2014). One of the local emergency youth shelters indicated had 297 individual youth from 2013 to 2014 (Victoria Youth Empowerment Society, 2014). We also know from previous studies with service providers that there is a much larger number of young people in vulnerable housing circumstances (Community Social Planning Council, 2008; Elliot Urban Planning, 2012).

The experience of youth homelessness is different than adult homelessness. Youth are embedded in relationships of dependence – dependent on adult caregivers – whether within their families of origin, or in state care, becoming homeless means that this dependent relationship is severed (Gaetz, 2014).

Youth experiencing homelessness across Canada are diverse and age matters – developmentally younger youth and older youth have different emotional and physical needs because of their different stages of development (Gaetz, 2014). To address youth homelessness, we need strategies that incorporate understandings of the differences between youth and adult homelessness as well as the differences across the youth population. These understandings can be woven into local and provincial services and supports for youth.

This research report adds important evidence of the nature of youth homelessness, the experiences of young people facing these challenges, and some suggested pathways to providing solutions.

Limitations of the Study

Research across Canada shows us that youth experiencing homelessness are not a homogenous group; they come from a range of different backgrounds and circumstances (Gaetz, 2014). There is a clear lack of certain voices in this study. The unique experiences of Indigenous youth and service providers are not explicitly and clearly represented in this study. The experiences of LGBTQ are also not explicitly acknowledged in this study. While attempts were made to connect with the diversity of youth and service providers, they were not completely successful. Further research should focus on the unique experiences of Indigenous youth, and further explore the diversity of youth experiencing homelessness in the region.

Defining Homelessness

Homelessness is not just what you see on the street. Even when homelessness is not visible, it still exists when people in our community are living in abandoned buildings, camping, staying in emergency shelters, or couch surfing.

There are many other people in our community who are living in housing that does not meet health and safety standards such as presence of mold and inadequate electrical or heating systems. All of these living situations, from unsheltered to insecurely housed, put people at risk of poor physical, mental and emotional health.

Canadian Definition of Homelessness

The Canadian Homelessness Research Network (2012) developed the Canadian Definition of Homelessness (CDOH). The CDOH describes homelessness as a range of physical living situations, organized here into four categories. Homelessness and housing exclusion include:

- **Unsheltered**, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation;
- **Emergency Sheltered**, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as Violence Against Women shelters;
- **Provisionally Accommodated**, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary and who do not have their own home or security of tenure;
- **Insecurely Housed**, referring to people who are 'at-risk' of homelessness, and whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards.

Defining Youth Homelessness

“Youth homelessness is a sub-population of those who are homeless and most often refers to young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers. Importantly, many youth who are homeless lack the essential social supports deemed necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood. Youth who are homeless do not have a stable or consistent residence or source of income, nor do they necessarily have adequate access to the support networks necessary to foster a safe and nurturing transition into the responsibilities of adulthood.”

“Age also matters when considering youth homelessness. Developmentally, there is a huge difference between the needs, circumstances and physical and emotional development of a 14 year old compared to an 18 year old or a 23 year old (though it must also be acknowledged that the factors that produce and sustain youth homelessness—including violence, trauma and abuse, may also contribute to developmental impairment for older youth). In addition to significant developmental differences, one must also consider the different statutory responsibilities associated with certain ages. Depending on the jurisdiction, the state will define the ages for which child protection services are responsible for care, what kinds of mental health supports are accessible and the age when one can live independently, obtain welfare and other government benefits, or leave school, etc.”

- From Stephen Gaetz (2014) in *Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada*

Typology of youth homelessness

One of the ways we can understand youth homelessness is through the development of a typology that captures temporary elements of experiences of homelessness rather than definitions of housing situations. This typology of youth homelessness developed by the *National Alliance to End Homelessness*, can help us more clearly understand the nature of supports and services that are needed, and also help us estimate the size of the population who need help.

Temporarily Disconnected youth experience homelessness for a short time and rarely return back into homelessness. It is suggested between 81 and 86 per cent of youth fall into this category (NAEH, 2012). This group are typically younger, has more stable connections with family members and likely to remain in school (Gaetz, 2014).

Unstably Connected youth may have a more complicated housing history with multiple episodes of homelessness. They likely are disconnected from school and struggle to secure and maintain employment. May have some connection to family members and less likely to have mental health and/or substance misuse concerns (Gaetz, 2014).

Chronically Disconnected make up the smallest group of unhoused youth but have the most complex needs. Typically experience longer-term homelessness with repeat episodes. They are more likely to struggle with mental health and/or substance misuse concerns. Connections with family members are often unstable or completely severed (Gaetz, 2014).

Methods and Methodology

Research Design

This study was conducted on behalf of the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness through a partnership between Community Social Planning Council, and the Centre for Addictions Research of BC. A community advisory group, made up of local service providers, was engaged to provide feedback on the development and implementation of the study. A youth community advisory committee also provided feedback on various aspects of the project, including research design. The research team included a youth-peer researcher who supported the research process by providing feedback on research design elements and co-facilitating focus groups. Within an overarching collaborative and participatory process, the study design drew on mixed methods for data collection, and multiple sources of both qualitative and quantitative data.

Qualitative focus groups were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of youth experiencing housing instability and/or homelessness within Greater Victoria. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with service providers to gain insight into current resources and supports, as well as barriers experienced by youth when working towards housing stability. Youth in the focus groups also had the option to fill in a short demographic questionnaire that consisted of close-ended questions about their current and past accommodations, sources of income and reasons for their experiences of homelessness. Youth who did not participate in the focus groups were also welcome to complete the short questionnaire as well. Secondary data about numbers and characteristics of youth accessing regional youth serving shelters and services was obtained from BC Housing and local service providers.

Ethics Approval for the study was obtained from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (HREB). Particular strategies were developed to minimize any potential harm especially in terms of power relations and confidentiality due to the vulnerability of the youth participants. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. In recognition of the time participants contributed to the study they were offered compensation in the form of a small honourarium, with the compensation amount determined from suggestions made by service providers who participated on the study's advisory committee. Food was also provided during the focus groups, and bus tickets were distributed.

The focus group questionnaires, guiding questions, and service provider interview questions were designed by the researchers and reviewed with the community advisory committee made up of local service providers who work with youth, and the youth advisory committee.

Youth Engagement for Participation

Research flyers were placed in and around local youth serving agencies. Participants voluntarily contacted the researchers indicating their interest in participating in the study. A total of 6 focus groups with youth were conducted at local youth serving agencies and housing programs that serve youth in October, November and December of 2014. A total 33 youth participated in 6 focus groups. Refreshments, bus tickets and honorarium were provided in recognition of the participant's contributions.

A basic demographic questionnaire was administered at the beginning of each focus group session. A set of guiding questions was used to structure the focus group discussion. The questions were developed by the researchers and reviewed by the advisory committees. Each of the 33 focus group participants filled in the demographic questionnaire and an additional 17 youth who did not want to participate in the focus groups also filled in the questionnaire for a total of 50 questionnaires completed.

Service Provider interviews

E-mail invitations were sent to agencies that serve youth with an open invitation to contact the researchers. A total of seven interviews were conducted with service providers.

Research on Youth Homelessness

The following presents a summary of national and local research on youth homelessness in order to position this study in the national and local context.

National Research on Youth Homelessness

A review of the leading national research on youth homelessness is summarized in this section. Estimating the number of youth who are homeless is challenging in that it is impossible to identify, enumerate and engage with youth who remain hidden. Many youth do not access community services and therefore remain unknown and instead may sleep outdoors, or "couch surf" while staying at friend's houses and have no other place to call home (Gaetz et al, 2013).

It is argued that there are at least 35,000 youth in Canada who experience homelessness during the year, with an estimate of 6000 on any given night (Segaert, 2012). Previous research demonstrates that young people between the ages of 16-24 make up about 20% of the population experiencing homelessness (Segaert, 2012).

Pathways into youth homelessness and the associated consequences are unique and distinct from those that affect adults. Gaetz (2014) has broadly identified the key factors that influence youth homelessness as, a) individual/relational; b) structural; and c) institutional and systems failures. A primary difference between youth and adult experiences of homelessness is that youth often are dependents who should be able to expect ongoing care from their families, and often leave because of abuse and neglect. Family conflict and the breakdown of the parental relationship is a key individual/relational factor contributing to youth homelessness (Gaetz et al, 2013; Karabanow & Naylor, 2013).

Structural factors contributing to youth homelessness include, poverty, under-employment and lack of affordable and suitable housing (Gaetz, 2014). A lack of affordable housing in this country makes it a major challenge for youth with low incomes to secure decent housing. Youth who are

engaged in employment may have reduced access to education, which can decrease their chances of attaining the education they need to acquire meaningful and adequate employment in the future. This, in turn, undermines youth's ability to live independently (Gaetz, 2014).

Institutional and systems failures that can lead to youth homelessness include exiting child welfare services, corrections, mental health and health systems. Youth are often discharged from institutional care without the practical life skills needed to live independently; this is even more the case for youth under the age of 18 (Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz et al, 2013).

National research also highlights the fact that the conditions and factors that contribute to youth homelessness are not isolated to big cities but also exist in suburban and rural areas (Noble et al, 2014).

Recent literature argues that typical methods of addressing youth homelessness have focused primarily on emergency responses with little success and that the focus needs to shift and focus instead on prevention and supports and accommodations (Gaetz et al, 2013; Gaetz 2014). Prevention involves catching youth before they fall into homelessness, by working with them and their families as well as involving school and other community resources. Another important preventative measure is to ensure youth are not discharged from institutional care without the necessary life skills and supports to live independently (Gaetz, 2014). It has been acknowledged that there will always be youth who may need to leave their family home and need alternative housing, as such it is important that options for youth to live in transitional, or more long-term supportive housing exist in order to provide appropriate developmental supports. The solutions to solving youth homelessness are comprehensive and involve a continuum of housing options for youth that includes transitional programs, supportive housing and low-barriers emergency shelters (Gaetz et al, 2013).

Regional Research on Youth Homelessness

Two key studies that have focused on youth homelessness and housing instability in the Capital Region are:

- *A Youth Housing Study for B.C.'s Capital Region* (2008) by the Community Council;
- *Youth in the West Shore: Housing Highlights* (2012) by Elliot Urban Planning.

A Youth Housing Study for B.C's Capital Region (2008) involved a survey and review of previous research in the region. It is important to note that youth participants involved in this study were between the ages of 13-30, which is different from most definitions that range from either 12 or 13, to 19 or 13-24. The findings of these reports tell us that in 2008 there were approximately 220 adolescent children (aged 13-18), 323 emerging adults (aged 19-24), and 73 young adults (aged 25-30) without safe, stable housing in the Capital Region. In total, 616 individuals were identified as in need of housing in our region and can be considered a conservative estimate. In this report, 25% of Victoria's youth experiencing homelessness were young women ages 21-30. Of these young women, 10% were found to earn their primary income from involvement in the sex industry.

The Youth in the West Shore: Housing Highlights (2012) highlights the findings from the West Shore Youth Housing Study: A Need and Demand Analysis which was an initiative of the West Shore Emergency Youth Housing Task Force and other community organizations to conduct a youth housing need and demand analysis for the West Shore, focusing on "at-risk" youth. This report identified, push and pull factors that contribute to youth homelessness. Push factors

include: family conflict, sexual orientation, family structure, poverty, abuse and neglect, learning and developmental disabilities, and alienation. Pull factors include: substance and addiction, and boyfriend/girlfriend relationships.

The youth and service providers in both studies **stated that youth were having a hard time finding a place to live because of the following factors:**

- Unaffordable housing, the cost of rent was too high
- Youth don't always know how to search for housing or employment
- Youth often face age discrimination and prejudice from landlords and others
- Vacancy rates were low in the Fall of 2011, only 2 bachelor units and 3 one-bedroom units were available for rent
- Apartments were expensive in the Fall of 2011, the average bachelor unit cost \$589 and the average one-bedroom unit cost \$725
- Safety concerns: "Not having to worry about people shooting up in the hallways"
- Being forced to have a roommate (or live-in boyfriend/girlfriend) to share the cost: "Finding a trustworthy roommate is a problem."
- Few "safe" homes for sexually exploited youth.
- Emerging adults, leaving foster care at age 19, with fragile social supports and the inability to fall back on parental housing if needed.
- Vulnerable young adults (19-30 years old) re-entering society from prison often have to deal with stigma and chaos, which reduces their chances of living in safe, affordable housing.
- All currently operating emergency and transitional housing facilities are owned and managed by non-Aboriginal organizations, yet 30% of clients are Aboriginal (including youth).

Both studies also identified that youth face numerous health and social challenges that impact their ability to access housing including:

- Learning disabilities
- Substance misuse
- A lack of transportation options
- The current economic situation
- Family instability
- Foster care
- Violence
- Sexual health
- Childhood trauma
- Sexual exploitation
- Insufficient local services for youth

Youth in the 2008 study stated the following factors would help them find and maintain housing:

- Youth identified the need for safer housing supported by detox and drug or alcohol treatment as well as more follow-up housing for recovery and maintenance after treatment.
- Immediate access to crisis housing and longer-term shelter
- A housing model for youth in transition that includes integrated service provision (e.g., life skills), until the youth is able to be self-sufficient and independently housed
- Combined supported, transitional housing providing life skills, a house monitor or mother, etc., or some sort of model leading to a semi-independent or independent subsidized housing for youth aged 16-18 and 19-24.
- More transitional housing for youth leaving foster care who cannot fall back on a stable parental home.

Solutions for addressing youth homelessness in the West Shore have been identified as:

- Youth want access to both short-term and long-term housing options
- Need for a local emergency shelter that has 6-8 beds available 24/7
- the need for somewhere to go to find out about available housing programs and supports
- the need for a broader range of services, from a low-barrier drop-in and emergency shelter, transitional housing, to more longer-term stable housing.
- Addressing relationship deficits that youth experience by making it a goal to build relationships with youth
- Examining housing issues for youth under 19 (who are still legal minors with distinct legislative and service requirements), separately from emergent adults between 19 thru 25 years, and 26 thru 30. Emergent adults experience different issues, and experience issues differently, than adolescent youth. Skill development and services must be included in every stage of the spectrum to ensure success.
- Generating a homelessness prevention plan – supporting families and youth before housing becomes unstable.

The findings from the national and local research presented here resonate with the findings of this study. This is explored in more detail in relation to the study's findings in the following sections of the report.

Profile of Youth and Service Providers

In order to develop a deeper sense of the experiences of youth, we held six focus groups with 33 youth participants. In addition to the focus groups we administered a short demographic survey to the 33 focus group participants and an additional 17 youth who did not participate in focus groups but wanted to fill in the questionnaire. Fifty youth in total provided demographic information ranging from age, cultural and ethnic background, and their experiences accessing services.

Profile of Youth

Fifty (50) youth completed a pencil and paper questionnaire that asked a variety of demographic questions ranging from age and current housing status to accessing services and supports in the community.¹

- 23 identified as male, and 27 identified as female (they had a range of gender identities to choose from)
- 26% identified as Aboriginal, 74% identified as Caucasian, and 3% identified as being a Visible Minority²
- 20 youth were between the ages of 13 and 18
- 30 youth were between the ages of 19 and 24
- 29 youth were currently experiencing homelessness and had previous experiences with homelessness, and 15 youth had previous experience with homelessness³

Profile of Youth Service Providers

Service providers ranged from front-line youth workers at emergency shelters, outreach workers, transitional housing support workers, and other types of youth workers from services across the region.

¹ While the results of the questionnaire cannot be extrapolated to a larger population, the information presented here provides an important demographic picture of the youth who were experiencing or had recently experienced homelessness in our region. Some findings were suppressed due to low counts, particularly for the 13 to 15 years age category. Youth focus group participants, as well as youth who chose not to participate in the focus groups filled in the questionnaire.

² Youth were able to choose more than one option for how they self-identified their ethnicity, therefore, the percentages do not add up to 100%.

³ Other responses were suppressed for reasons of confidentiality and privacy.

Organization of the Report

The following sections of the report explore the study's findings on the factors that contribute to youths' pathways into homelessness and housing instability, and the factors that contribute to their pathway out of homelessness. The first section, *Pathways into Homelessness*, presents the perspectives of youth and service providers on how youth become homeless or unstably housed. The second section, *Pathways out of Homelessness* explores youths' and service providers' perspectives on the factors that contribute to youths' pathways out of homelessness.

The voices of the focus group participants, and the service providers who were interviewed, are reflected in the description of youths' experiences facing homelessness and housing instability, and the pathways to housing stability (pathways to housing instability are described in the last section of the report). The common themes that emerged across the focus groups and interviews illustrate the pathways that lead to youth homelessness, and the pathways that lead out of youth homelessness.

Study Findings: Youth Pathways into Homelessness in the Capital Region

Youth and service providers described a number of different types of factors that contributed to youths’ pathways into homelessness. What emerged from the focus groups and interviews broadly aligned with the three key factors that Gaetz (2014) outlined that contributed to youth homelessness: individual and relational; structural; and institutional and systems failures. This section uses those three broad categories to organize the findings and provides further reflection as to how this study’s findings align with Gaetz’s typology.

Individual and Relational Factors

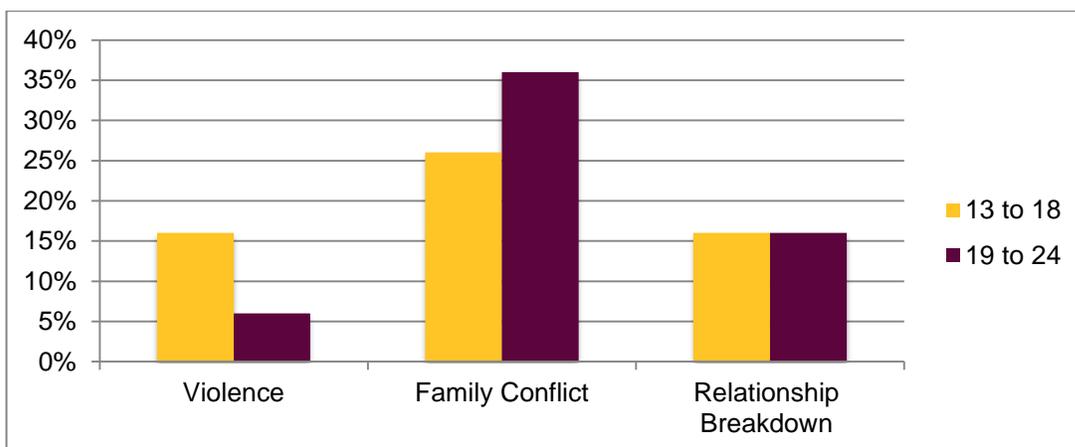
Individual and relational factors refer to the breakdown of familial and other inter-personal relationships that often contribute to youth experience homelessness or become unstably housed (Gaetz, 2014).

Family Conflict

There is a common misconception that youth who experience homelessness are simply “running away” from home in order to avoid following parental rules. Although this may be the case for a small percentage of youth, it is definitely not the reality of the youth who participated in this study. Although the reasons for homelessness vary from youth to youth, a majority of youth experience homelessness due to family conflict, violence and relationship breakdown.

The findings from the survey reveal that in total, 42% of youth claimed they left home due to family conflict and 32% as a result of relationship breakdown. Violence was also an important factor, particularly for youth in the 13 to 18 age range. These findings are consistent with national research indicating that these circumstances are not unique to the region (Gaetz, 2014). The graph below shows the distribution of youth participants who stated that family conflict, violence, and relationship breakdown were reasons for homelessness. These reasons had the highest number of responses.

Chart 1: Individual and Relational Factors for leaving home (N=50)



*** Youth were asked to choose from a list provided all the reasons that applied to their experience of homelessness.*

Therefore, they could choose more than one answer.

Youth participants (FG) spoke about the conflict they experienced in their homes, and how that conflict contributed to leaving home, as well as engaging in violence and substance use themselves:

FG: “My grandma just told me there was like this [housing accommodation] that I could go and live in, which is funny, because my grandma was one of the reasons why I do meth, because I was kind of being abused and stuff by my grandparents. [...] so I guess she kind of kicked me out in a way. She’s like “There’s a place- go”

FG: “...My mom’s roommate is a [fucking bitch] and her boyfriend is a hed [uses substances] and last time I was there he woke me up at three in the morning and started yelling at me to go to school and then tried to steal my PlayStation. I broke two of his teeth and slammed the door in his face.”

Service providers (SP) also cited family conflict as one of reasons for youth experiencing homelessness. Substance use can often be a source or contributing factor to the conflict as this service provider explains:

SP: “... substance use is a big one, I would say. Youth are using and they might be living with their family or in foster care or you know, and then often get kicked out of the space. That’s a common one that I hear about.”

Noble et al, (2014) note that along with substance use concerns, other factors that can contribute to break down of familial relationships can include the presence of learning disabilities, and mental health concerns either connected to the youth themselves or other people living in the home. This was particularly illustrated by the comments from the focus group participants above.

Breakdown of the Parent-Child Relationship

The state of the parent-child relationship was identified by a number of the service providers who were interviewed, as a key factor contributing to youth homelessness. Breakdown of youth’s relationship with their parents can lead to youth leaving the home whether by choice or because they are no longer welcome in their home.

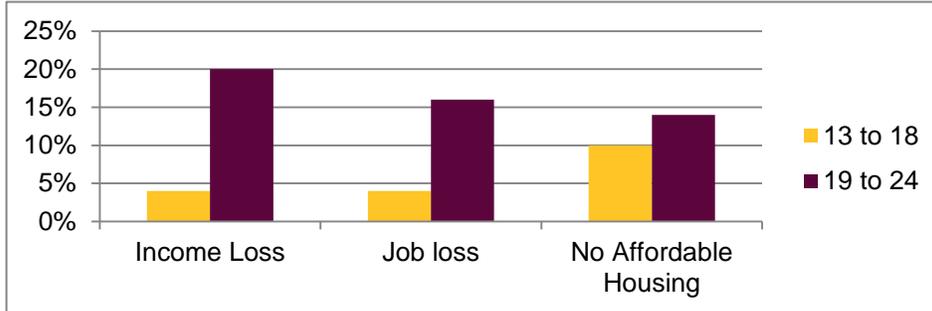
SP: “So much of it is relationship with their parents, what that looks like. If the parent has any kind of substance abuse issue, and/or a mental health issue, that’s usually a very big factor [...] but I would say for the most part, it’s multilayered obviously, but the number one factor is the parent-child relationship has broken down to some degree. And...either the child isn’t welcome in the home anymore, or the child doesn’t want to be there anymore [...] And depending on the kid, some of them are pretty angry at the world and burn a lot of bridges and then no longer have too many options left to them. But there’s so many, again, so many reasons as to why that would happen.”

Local youth emergency shelters see firsthand the consequences of family conflict and the breakdown of the parent-child relationship. According to the Youth Empowerment Society’s annual report, the top three reasons youth accessed the Kiwanis Youth Emergency Shelter (KEYS): family breakdown/mediation required, homelessness/couch surfing and foster placement breakdown/discharge (Victoria Youth Empowerment Society, 2014).

Structural Factors

The key findings on the structural factors such as limited access to the labour market, and the lack of housing affordability, which contribute to youth homelessness in the region are consistent with other research across the country (Gaetz, 2014; Noble, 2014). We found that the perspectives of both youth and service providers were similar and each group identified the common concrete factors that make finding and maintaining housing in the region a challenge.

Chart 2: Structural Factors youth identified as contributing to homelessness (N=50)

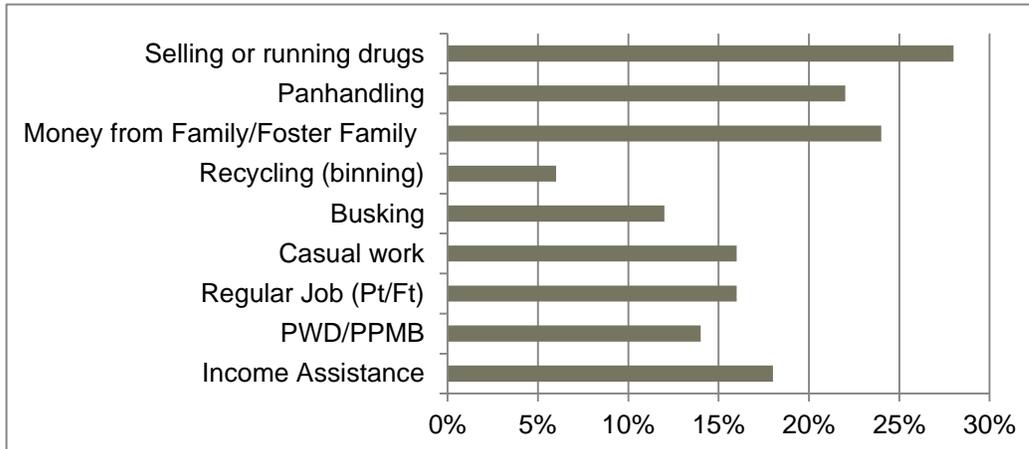


*** Youth were asked to choose from a list provided all the reasons that applied to their experience of homelessness. Therefore, they could choose more than one answer.*

Out of the youth that filled in the question, almost 1 in 5 (24%) or 12 youth, indicated that income loss was a main reason they were experiencing homelessness. The same proportion of youth 24% (12) indicated that a lack of affordable housing was a reason for homelessness. One in 5 youth indicated that a loss of employment was also a contributing factor to becoming homeless.

The questionnaire also asked youth to indicate their various sources of income. Youth were provided a list of options and asked to choose as many options that applied to their situation in recognition that youth often cobble together an income from different sources to get by. The chart below shows multiple sources of income that youth might draw upon just to get by.

Chart 3: Youth identified sources of income (N=50)



*** Youth were asked to choose from a list provided all possible sources of income. Therefore, they could choose more than one answer.*

The main sources of income identified by youth were from selling or running drugs, followed by receiving money from family, panhandling, employment (full time/part time/casual), and income assistance.

The results from the questionnaire indicate that youth survey participants relied heavily on informal economic activity (drug running/selling, panhandling). Possible reasons for why youth rely more heavily on informal economic activity surface when youth explain the challenges they face when trying to access employment opportunities, and other sources of income. It is important to remember that youth often do not have the same access to employment given their age, education and other factors. As this service provider explains:

SP: "... I'm so thankful we have programs like, YAGS [Youth Agreements], and independent living, but for the youth that don't necessarily qualify for that and are working two part-time jobs and trying to go to school, something has to give for them to be able to afford things, and it's usually school which then limits their ability to move on and get out of homelessness- like something always has to give. Sometimes it's easier to go deal drugs then, because you're going to make more money than working two part-time jobs.

Access to Employment

Lack of job opportunities

Access to employment is particularly challenging for youth under the age of 19, and even more challenging for youth under the age of 15 because legally, they need parental consent to be employed.⁴

Some, but not all youth spoke about the challenges they were having in finding employment. This problem appears to be even more of an issue and concern for youth living in more rural communities.

FG: "I'm having extreme difficulty having to find a job. It's kind of a vicious cycle when you're homeless, trying to find work. Especially in Sooke too, there's nowhere to work. If you're under the age of eighteen, the only place you can really work is like A&W, or McDonalds. There's nothing else out there yet."

Moreover, youth have a difficult time finding employment that pays enough for them to be able to afford housing. As the quote above illustrates, the jobs available to youth are part-time, and low paying.

Lack of job skills and training

Many youth spoke about their lack of knowledge in seeking, finding and maintaining a job. This struggle is exacerbated for youth who simultaneously have to seek housing and other kinds of supports.

FG: "... when I was fifteen I was homeless and I was trying to get a job. They should have a special person or program you can go to so I could figure out, at a young age, how to get a job, because at that point you don't have the life skills to walk in, do an interview, or even have a resume. You haven't gone through any of that. You're thrown into a situation, you're clueless, and have no one to guide you in any way. People just expect you're going to somehow maintain this job, and you have no idea what you're even doing."

No address, no job. No job, no address.

A common scenario for youth is that they find themselves unable to find employment without a home with a fixed address and they aren't able to find a home without employment.

FG: "I got fired from the [place of employment] in downtown Victoria when I was homeless because they found out that I was homeless. They fired me because I said I had no address. That's one of the vicious cycles: in order to get a job you kind of need an address."

⁴ Under the B.C. *Employment Standards Act*, children who are 12 or older, but have not yet turned 15, cannot be employed without the written consent of a parent or legal guardian. Children under 12 years of age cannot be employed without a child employment permit issued by the Director of Employment Standards (Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training and Responsible for Labour, 2014). Accessible online at: <http://www.labour.gov.bc.ca/esb/young/>

Access to Income

YAGS are a challenge to get for many youth

The Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) provide income assistance specifically for youth through Youth Agreements (YAGs) in recognition of the employment and housing challenges faced by youth under 19.

A local youth service provider explained that the actual amount of income youth receive from YAGs can vary slightly for each youth depending on their individual situations. MCFD provides a rental supplement as part of the YAG (tied to how much the rent is). If a youth's rent is higher than what MCFD will cover, youth are required to top up their rental subsidy from their own income. MCFD will also pay one damage deposit.

Youth receive a separate amount for food with caveats for extra if they have specific nutritional issues (celiac, vegetarian, etc.) The youth will also get an allotment for clothes, phone (can be put to home phone, or cell, not both), and sometimes cable or internet. Then they get a bus pass, or money towards gas if they have a car. Youth can request extras for special things like grad fees, which are approved on a case by case basis.

Both youth and service providers shared that they have witnessed YAGS being helpful to the youth that can access this type of support from MCFD. However, it was repeatedly stated that it is very difficult for youth to qualify for this type of support.

SP: "It is so hard to get on a YAG, I think, because you must have an open child protection file (so first off a youth has to be okay with having their parents investigated by MCFD and some youth are unwilling to do this, and then the social worker has to find evidence of abuse or neglect), and then different social workers have a different view of the ideal candidate. Next, there is a checklist of "risks" a youth have to fit into in order to even be looked at, but then the youth must be doing well enough that they stand a chance of being successful with little guidance and supervision. There is a great spectrum of youth that have been able to get a YAG. There is considerable paperwork, goals and expectations a youth is supposed to go through with their social worker before starting on a YAG."

SP: "I think it's getting more difficult to get a youth agreement because the ministry's a bit strapped. I mean, they still have to follow obviously their mandate; they have parameters around how they give out youth agreements...I think it might've been easier for youth to get supported by the ministry in the past than it is now. And of course, even if they do get offered the support, there's not a lot of housing resources out there."

MCFD Youth Agreements

A youth agreement is a legal agreement between you and the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). The purpose of the agreement is to help youth gain independence, return to school, and/or gain work experience and life skills. To qualify youth need to be at risk, be between the ages of 16 to 18, and there is no parent or other person willing to take responsibility for the youth, or youth cannot return home to their family for safety reasons. Youth must also have an open child protection file.

The absence of a protection issue or a youth's fear of reporting their parents makes it difficult for youth to access ministry support leaving them vulnerable to homelessness.

SP: "...youth agreements are very hard to get. You know, and I totally get the ministry's "Well we're not going to put a seventeen year old in foster care" and I don't necessarily totally disagree with that, although I do know some seventeen year olds who probably could thrive in foster care. But, so there's- if you don't have a child protection issue, then that's it, there's no involvement. So then you're couch surfing if you don't have a job, then...that's- you know, then what?"

SP: "The ones who...you know, don't fit or aren't willing to- like who don't fit MCFD child protection, or aren't willing to rat out their parents. A lot of the kids I work with have younger siblings, and while things aren't great at home for them, they don't want ministry involvement because they don't want their younger siblings taken from their parents. So they aren't willing to...go to the ministry."

Inadequate income assistance rates

Youth between the ages of 19-24 who do receive income assistance spoke about how the inadequate amount of income they received from the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation made it very difficult to find housing and provide other necessities for healthy living. Many youth focus group participants related to one peers comment below, which demonstrates how inadequate income assistance rates can contribute and reinforce a sense of hopelessness.

FG: "You can't actually afford to get a house with the amount of money they're giving you, so you're just going to go drink it away anyways, or whatever your substance of choice is."

Inadequate Housing

Lack of affordable market housing

Both youth and service providers identified the lack of affordable market rental housing coupled with a limited supply of youth-orientated housing in the Capital Region, as a significant challenge in keeping youth housed. Service providers consistently discussed their struggle in trying to find affordable housing for youth.

Average Rent and Vacancy Rates for Bachelor and 1 Bedroom Apartments for Victoria CMA

Unit Size	Average Rent (2013)	Average Rent (2014)	Vacancy Rate (2013)	Vacancy Rate (2014)
Bachelor	\$706/month	\$723/month	2.3	1.4
1 bedroom	\$833/month	\$849/month	3.0	1.5

Source: Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Fall 2014 Rental Market Survey

SP: *“...And yeah, the affordability of Victoria which is a whole other thing that- but it really, I mean, not that it- I think it’s challenging to be a homeless- or....you know, chronically homeless youth in any city. I think Victoria’s rental market, and that kind of thing, makes this city particularly challenging...”*

SP: *“And then...like more housing. I mean, I don’t- that’s the- you know, I think we do try and connect with all the youth that come in here and we’ll check out where they’re at, but ultimately, we can still put that process through and it’s very difficult to find housing, especially for youth that are using and need that kind of support.”*

SP: *“...I mean there are vacancies. I was helping a youth look. There’s lots of vacancies but there’s not many that are very affordable.”*

It is important to note that throughout all the focus group sessions youth explained that they wanted more help and support to maintain their housing once they had secured it. Housing and supports were spoken about together and seen as mutually inclusive. The need for relationship-based, follow-up supports will be discussed later in this report.

Housing - Work - Education Puzzle

The combination of low-inadequate incomes and the lack of affordable and suitable housing options puts youth in what service providers have described as a *housing-work-education puzzle*. Service providers described the challenges youth face while trying to stay in school and working full time in order to afford housing in the region. Youth are placed in an unfortunate position where they often have to choose between getting an education and having a place to live.

SP: *“...Because they really...you really need to be working fulltime to have any sort of money to scrape together. And that limits our youth so much in terms of their ability to you know, get an education, that kind of thing. And then I think they do just end up couch surfing and falling back on easier things. And so they never quite break that cycle of homelessness then, because like how do you do it?”*

Institutional and Systems Failures

Institutional and Systems Failures refer to a breakdown in supports, and policy coordination across different government ministries which can often result in youth falling through the gaps, not receiving the support they need to succeed, finding themselves accessing services in the homelessness services sector (Gaetz, 2014).

Difficult Accessing System Supports

Some youth focus group participants shared how difficult it was for them to access the supports they felt they needed. In the current system, it is often difficult to get access to needed supports. For example,

FG: “It should be easier to get into the foster care system. It was a massive pain in the ass. I was trying to for nine years to get into foster care, and the really annoying thing is, is if a kid’s trying to get into foster care, you have to get your parent to sign over the right to live with them. Which is a really, really broken system.”

FG: “Nobody ever wants to go talk to the government or social care or anything just because of how much of a hassle it is just to get everything sorted out. You just need so many things.”

Inadequate Transitions Out of Child Welfare Services

A well-documented key factor underpinning youth homelessness is the failure of institutional systems to provide youth with the resources they need to transition out of care and/or into independent living. These institutional systems include child welfare, corrections, mental health and health services (Gaetz, 2014; Noble et al, 2014).

When youth were asked to describe the barriers they faced when accessing stable, affordable housing, lack of immediate, and follow-up support, the experience of leaving child welfare care came up multiple times. The abrupt discharge of youth at the age of 19 into independent living without transitional or follow up support was identified as a pathway into homelessness by many youth between the ages of 18-24. The common theme was that youth felt abandoned and unprepared for independent living when they were abruptly discharged or “kicked-out” from government care and/or foster homes with what they described as with little notice and preparation.

FG: “...Pretty much when they kick you out of foster care, they say there’s the welfare office, fucking take a hike.”

FG: “When I moved out of my foster home they put me into- like gave me a worker for transitional into independent living and they’re supposed to work with you at finding a house. They didn’t work with me, they just gave me a house and told me to go. They discontinued talking to me and then they cut me off of [...] and gave me twenty dollar food vouchers after I got evicted and told me to couch surf with my twenty dollar vouchers and pay the parents.”

Lack of Services for 19-24 Age Group

“The nineteen to twenty-four is the weird age. That’s when people usually go homeless ...”

When youth reach the age of nineteen, the services and supports they have access to change, and in the majority of cases, this has a negative impact on their ability to maintain stability in their lives. Youth focus group participants described the challenges of turning nineteen, particularly if they’re leaving the care of the ministry.

FG: “The nineteen to twenty-four is like the shitty- like, weird age. That’s when people usually go homeless, because they just like, get off the ministry altogether and are just kind of left to do all the things themselves. Most people in ministry care, once they get out of the care of a foster home or something like that, it’s just dropped out into nothingness.”

FG: “...And once you’re past nineteen they pretty much drop you and they’re like “Oh, have a good day. Oh, we’ll give you a gift card now leave us alone for the rest of your life”

“Ageing out” of ministry care was not the only challenge associated with the ominous nineteenth birthday, access to other types of services and supports shift and change as well. Often, once youth turn nineteen, they have to access adult oriented services, which many of them don’t feel safe accessing as described by some focus group participants below:

FG: “When I went homeless I had just turned nineteen [inaudible] so I couldn’t go to KEYS [Kiwanis Emergency Youth Shelter] and stuff like that. Like a lot of people could. There’s a lot more for youth than there is for like, adults.”

FG: “Well, I’m between- I’m twenty-one right, so after nineteen, you don’t have any like, really drop in places we can go to stay warm in the day time, except for places that try to like, push their...their shenanigans on you, make you sit in a circle and say your name. Doesn’t really....Or places full of really, really messed up people.”

As the youth have highlighted above, not being prepared for the transition out of ministry care and other community services leaves many youth overwhelmed and vulnerable to experiencing homelessness. This experience also connects with another important issue youth identified as a contributing factor to their becoming homeless: a lack of preparation, and a lack of life skills.

Lack of Lifeskills Taught to Youth in Schools and in Child Welfare System

A consistent theme that came up in the focus groups with youth is youth's desire to be independent, and to be equipped with the practical life skills needed to be able to care and support them. All of the focus group sessions included a conversation about the importance of having life skills training taught to youth in high schools.

Youth described how they felt vulnerable in situations where they have to depend on other people for resources, and explained that their lack of practical skills and preparation for daily independent living leaves them susceptible to homelessness and ending up in unsafe situations because they feel they have to depend on others for their survival who may not be acting in the best interests of the youth.

FG: "... In foster care [...] You get everything handed to you on a silver platter and once you turn nineteen, "Well, good luck". You have to cook your food, you have to pay your rent, you have to clean your house. You don't know this in foster care, it's done for you."

FG: "Yeah, I was just on a youth agreement and then, that was it, never heard from them. They gave me a cheque every month, but that was it. And that still doesn't teach anybody life skills, really. I mean, giving somebody a cheque doesn't teach them how to cook."

The combination of a lack of practical life skills, and intensive transitional and follow-up support leaves far too many youth susceptible to becoming homeless. From the perspectives of the youth focus group participants, the lack of ministry support for older teenagers and young adults sets them up to fail, and places them on the path toward homelessness and instability.

Parental Consent

In terms of accessing employment and housing, attaining parental consent can be an issue for youth who require it to access services or to rent a place. Many youth leave their homes abruptly and often as a result of conflict, abuse and/or violence with their parents. In an effort to move forward youth remain dependent on their estranged parent's consent. Policies requiring parental consent for access to services, or employment opportunities can be seen as a system failure as it leaves youth vulnerable and powerless to their parent's control.

Lack of Consistent and Trusting Relationships within Institutional Systems (Including Social Service Systems)

“... there should be some sort of way to deal with people on a personal level”

A key factor identified by both youth and service providers was the importance for youth to have at least one significant relationship with a positive and supportive healthy adult. This finding is in alignment with national research yet the fact that it seems so difficult to do in practice is overwhelming.

Youth, as an age and developmental group, tend to be embedded in relationships, particularly relationships of dependence – this is one of the key differences between youth and adults experiencing homelessness (Gaetz, 2014) The development of trusting, authentic relationships are a key factor in the future success of youth transitions into independent living. Many youth come from situations that involved conflict, abuse and/or neglect, trauma, where they lacked healthy, positive relations.

Throughout the focus group sessions with youth it was conveyed time and time again that youth want to engage with service providers on a personal level.

FG: “Having like a person that you could phone and have somebody’s direct line number instead of having to wait and talk to a one eight-hundred number where it’s some random person at a random office somewhere within the province talking to you, and they don’t know you. Like, there should be some sort of way to deal with people on a personal level.”

Unfortunately, many of the youth focus group participants spoke of the challenges and difficulties they experienced in their relationships with service providers.

Many youth shared their frustration with being bounced around from worker to worker and discussed how difficult it was for them to move forward and make progress when they were subjected to inconsistent, and often disjointed supports. They explained that this limits their opportunities for progress, or hinders their ability to move forward when they often feel stuck in the same place because of having to repeatedly start new relationships with workers. Many felt that more time is spent retelling their stories to new workers rather than taking steps to improve their situations.

FG: “...The places that do try to help me is pretty much like- it’s really repetitive. It’s always the same questions that I answer over and over. Like getting bounced around worker to worker. Need like...the ability to actually make progress. It’s not going to happen if your workers keep on changing. Pushing you off.”

Many youth spoke of the difficulty they experience in sharing their stories and trusting and opening up to service providers. Youth described how they have a hard time trusting and opening up to service providers who come across too “professional” and give the impression that they care more about their job than themselves.

FG: “The people you talk to are really professional and more about their job. And they really don’t understand that there’s so many factors being,

in homelessness, like drugs, alcohol, your friends- usually having places for you stay, usually bad friends get you in bad things. But yeah, just can't really relate to the people you talk to. They don't really understand or, they try to understand, but you can tell they don't. And they just seem like more about their job than you. So just really impersonal."

Youth focus group participants also disclosed that they fear what service providers could do with the information youth share with them and that they feel that service providers often focus more on what they feel the issue is, not what the youth have identified as the issue.

FG: *"You kind of fear what they're going to do with that information. You kind of wonder, are they going to go- like I had a huge problem with my parents, and I always wonder if they're going to go tell my parents what I said or cause more of a disturbance when you think it might be more peaceful not talking to them, when you never know what they're going to do with it. They can get you in some sticky situations too."*

FG: *"Focusing on what problems they think are the problems instead of what you're telling them the problems are."*

Youth told us that they want someone to support and believe in them, and to encourage them to thrive. Given a lack of trusting relationships that many youth described, youth service providers need to allow time to build trust and to not give up on youth. While the norm described by youth is that it is near impossible to develop trusting and supportive relationships, it does happen - with time. A youth focus group participant shares an example of this below:

FG: *"...When I was fifteen, I didn't want to see her [service provider]. I didn't see her for two years. And, finally, I went and saw her and she totally opened up my eyes to like the things that I can get, in a way that- the help I can get. But it's just the fact that it took me two years to- well, it's the opening up part to somebody. Like when you go through homeless or anything like that, you build like a wall almost and you don't want to have it knocked down, so you don't trust people. So when someone, like [service provider] came into my life, I was like "No, not happening" and then one day I was like "Maybe" so I slowly let her in, and then doors were opening. And then I ended up in a good spot. It was just the fact of breaking down that wall sometimes is so hard. It took me two years to do it."*

Similarly, service providers told us that it is important to advocate for youth non-stop and to leave the door open for them-youth need to know that service providers are there for them when youth are ready.

SP: *"...And I think on top of that, obviously having supportive workers I think is always a big piece. I think the youth that are able to do this have people that go to bat for them; advocate for them non-stop and really are willing to stick with them even when those youth don't want their help; leave their door open, "When you're ready, come back". And really keep that open approach. I think those are the youth that get out of this, and for the youth that maybe don't*

have access to that, it becomes really challenging. The more services that shut their doors, the less likely they are to get out of homelessness.

Youth maintain that it is more useful, and beneficial to them if service providers continue to support a youth until they have fully transitioned to independent living. Youth make clear that it is important that service providers don't give up on youth prematurely, and continue to guide them, as is highlighted in the conversation between two youth focus group participants below:

FG: "Just like...after people help you and then thinking that you're helped, and then just like, leaving you when you're like halfway, then you get back into everything and...it's just like a cycle kind of."

FG: "That's what it was like for me too, and then I screwed up once, and then I hear from them. It's only until you mess up, that you hear from them."

Additionally, youth and service providers shared that youth need to trust that service providers won't report them to the police (i.e. if they have warrants)

SP: "I think, part of reducing barriers, especially for people that are just wanting to get support is like, when they come into the drop in at [agency], ...that they'll feel comfortable being able to have a conversation around what their situation is right now and they'll want to look at it and both different options, but they don't want to feel as though someone's just going to call in, you know, and try and- or to push them into something. So we respect people's boundaries and their decisions, and they can make that on their own. And so, and certainly we'll try and encourage the best option possible that will probably be better for them in the long run. So, that could be something that kids considered a barrier if they're no longer able to see their regular worker because they feel as that will be- that person is required to call the police over an outstanding warrant."

In light of the focus group youth's backgrounds, and stated needs for a consistent positive relationship to help them transition to and maintain independent housing it is imperative that more resources are put towards further fostering a model of relationship between youth and their service providers that is youth-centered, consistent, reliable and trusting.

SP: "Well for this one, I would definitely say like, where the gaps come in, is trust and funding for workers. They have...one worker doing five workers' jobs. And clients aren't getting the support."

Summary of Findings for Pathways into Homelessness

The findings related to youths' pathways into homelessness align with previous research done locally, and current research nationally [Gaetz, 2014; Noble et al, 2014; Karabanow & Naylor, 2013). An analysis of the pathways into homelessness for youth in the region align with previous research, demonstrating that the factors that contribute to youth homelessness are different from those which lead to adult homelessness (Gaetz, 2014; Noble et al, 2014). Pathways into homelessness for youth are complex and as shown in this study, their young age leaves them especially vulnerable when parental and familial relationships breakdown. A lack of a significant relationship in youth's lives

Structural factors out of youth's control, such as lack of employment opportunities, high cost of living combined with a lack of affordable housing in the region have been identified as pathways into homelessness for many youth in the region. Existing income supports have been reported by youth and service providers as being too challenging to access in the case of YAGS and too low to afford housing and the necessities for healthy living. These challenges are exacerbated for youth who are also trying to stay in school.

Youth in the region who leave state care are often discharged into precarious living or homelessness. Youth leaving care have told us that they felt vulnerable to homelessness when they exited care and lacked the practical skills needed to live independently. Youth and service providers argue that the lack of ministry support for older teenagers and young adults sets them up to fail, and places them on the path toward homelessness and instability. Another result of institutional and system failure is that a lack of coordinated and consistent service delivery makes it difficult for youth to develop healthy relationships with the adults they do have in their lives- service providers. Instead youth have stated that they feel their relationships with workers are impersonal and they feel uncared for. Youth maintain that it is more useful, and beneficial to them if service providers work to build a trusting relationship with youth while they support them on their path to independent living.

Study Findings: Pathways Out of Homelessness - Responding to Youth Need

“People in power, all they really care about is money, which makes sense, but they need to try to focus more on the youth because technically, we are the future.” – Focus Group Participant

The following sections explore what youth focus group participants and service providers shared about where they see gaps in the current system of supports, what currently works for youth, and how can we improve on how youth homelessness is addressed in the region. The findings are discussed in relation to prevention, emergency services, and supporting transitions out of homelessness (Gaetz, 2014).

In the Capital Region, responses to youth homelessness range from income assistance supports including youth agreements, rental supplements and access to emergency income supports; supportive housing, emergency shelters, transitional housing, and housing outreach workers who assist with navigating bureaucratic systems and advocate for youth on their behalf.

Prevention Programs and Supports

Prevention programs and supports refer to activities, coordinated interventions, and information sharing that happens before youth become homeless.

School Engagement

School is the first point of contact for almost all youth in our communities. Schools can often be places where vulnerable youth have at least one trusting adult they can turn to. Staying connected to school is considered a protective factor for youth who are experiencing homelessness, unstably housed, or at-risk of homelessness.

FG: “That’s something that I strongly believe needs to change, is what they teach us in school”

Teach life skills in middle and high schools

Youth see the benefit of the education they receive but describe how they would change the curriculum to encompass more life skills development – that is what they see as an essential missing piece in their education. Youth focus group participants describe this gap below:

FG: “And kind of preparing us. Even in school, preparing us for what’s really happening when we’re being thrown out. I think that’d be helpful.”

FG: “And like...they need to stop just thinking that kids only need to learn those social studies, or they need to learn about math, because really in the end that’s not as important as learning life skills, and like, that’s something that I strongly believe needs to change, is what they teach us in school. Because they don’t teach us nearly as many things as they should. And like, you just have to have the tough lessons of life... I think if they taught it more in school then we wouldn’t have to go through as much as trauma or things like that.”

Similar to youth, service providers stressed the importance of equipping youth with the necessary practical skills needed to live independently. These comments are highlighted below:

SP: "...And so I also think they identify having some life skills. The ones who can budget and stuff, it makes a huge difference. They come up to us, and when they can figure that kind of life skills piece out, again, it helps them with their money; it helps the with that...So I think there's so many things around maintaining your housing that the youth that seem to do well and come back us and say "I'm doing really good" have had that kind of life skill and have been able to do that piece."

SP: "I think that...and I'm going to go really, really micro here, but I feel like the things that have really made a difference are the really practical small things...that seems to be a piece that really helps a lot of them, is the pieces the parents really would have, or should have done. So yes the bigger pieces are really important too, but I feel like in their day-to-day lives they need to know how to do those things; how to open a bank account. So many things that you need to have in place in order to rent, period...and they don't know how to do them, so how can they even rent a place? How can they even get off the street? Get a job? ...well, somebody has to sit down and show you how to do it. So to me, that's the piece."

Increase Student's Awareness and Access to Supports

"... More teenagers need to know [about services] because I feel like they would use it if they knew ..."

Youth told us that a major barrier to accessing services was that they did not know what services and supports existed. Focus group participants consistently spoke of the need to have a centralized location/service (online or a physical location) where youth who are experiencing housing instability or crisis could go, a one-stop shop where they could access all the information they need to help them find, secure and maintain housing. Many youth detailed how difficult it was for them to find help because they didn't know where to start to look or who to reach out to - asking for help and having to admit they needed housing was hard enough.

FG: "And like an information board- even if there was like- I think if there was a website that had, like, certain addresses, phone numbers, to all the different help for youth for homeless. All that. I think that would really help a lot. Because I mean, we do live in more of a technology world now, so it's like- I was like looking up online a lot, but I couldn't find much information for like free counseling and things like that. I couldn't really find anything. So yeah, I think that would be good. And then, like I said before, if they had more information at school for that too, where they could give out the website. That would really help."

FG: "...More teenagers need to know because I feel like they would use it if they knew, but, most of them don't. Like with teen help cards, like they have like little cards with phone numbers that you can call. I'm sure if you gave those to teenagers, with a number they can call, they would use it."

While crisis services for youth exist in the region, according to focus group participants, this information is not reaching youth who need to hear it the most.

Foster Healthy Attachments to Adults

Both youth and service providers interviewed spoke of the importance and positive benefits youth experience when they form attachments to at least one supportive adult. This understanding is reflected in the following service provider comments:

SP: “I think if they become attached to...a healthy adult. That is- I know, it doesn’t matter who it is, if it’s a teacher, if it’s a friend’s parent, if it’s a professional, it kind of doesn’t matter. That seems to be the one the thing, if they have someone who actually has their back; and then the second piece after that is resiliency. And that’s not necessarily you can totally teach a kid, but if they have it, and they have an adult who’s got their back I feel like then they’re going to be okay. I don’t know if they’ll go on to be prime minister, but they’ll be okay.”

SP: “I mean, of course other things like just having support from a regular worker I think is important. Like someone they can develop a relationship with and can trust. That plays a role in people transitioning out of homelessness because it typically seems to give people the support that they need through the process, because, especially transitioning into living in homes, sometimes that’s not always successful for people because it’s not something they’re used to. And so if you’ve been street involved for a while then you go into having some sort of like, you might tend to need a little bit more support and like getting used to having a bed to sleep in every night and a place to care of.”

A positive sign is that various types of service providers in the community understand the importance of positive youth attachment to an adult, as reflected in the comment below. What is still needed is for funding mandates to recognize the importance of these relationships and to provide flexibility for youth to maintain connection with key service providers in their lives. Funding mandates and policies need to encourage the continuation of these relationships rather than working to separate youth from what may be their first healthy personal relationship.

SP: “We were having a meeting, and a doctor actually said this, I was so proud, I was like “Yay”, but a doctor was basically like “You know what, what we’re really realizing is that the youth attach to someone and it doesn’t matter what program, what box, the worker has to tick, that youth is attached to that person and we shouldn’t get in the way of that... [and then we are told] “Well, you can’t see this person anymore because you no longer have an addictions issue”, and it’s like yeah but that’s their person...I get that funders have a specific purpose in mind, but I feel like for youth, can we not get it out there that, can we just have a little bit more of a flexible thing here? Because you know, there’s study after study after study that says personal relationship is the most important piece. We know this. This isn’t even like people just guessing.”

Another strategy identified through the interviews with service providers was to not only help youth develop one key relationship but to also –often through that key relationship- help them connect within the broader community which in turn, acts as a protective factor because the more people they know that care about them increases their chances of being “caught” when things start to break down.

SP: “...So, the bigger, wider they can cast their net the better off they are, and the more likely, you know, the more community members and the more people that care about them the more likely they are to be caught when things start to fall apart for them.”

Emergency Responses

Youth need support as soon as they are in crisis and instability. Emergency responses are types of supports are seen as emergency responses and are generally not seen as long-term solutions to address youth homelessness but are absolutely necessary to provide safe shelter when youth need it (Gaetz, 2014).

Youth Emergency Shelter Use in the Capital Region

Two local youth emergency shelters provided shelter usage data. The emergency shelter for youth ages 13 to 18 saw 297 individual youth over the 2013/2014 fiscal year and 97 of those youth had never accessed the service before. The seasonal emergency youth shelter (only open 8 months of the year), saw a 30% decrease from 2008 to 2014 of youth under 18 accessing their services. In the 2013-2014 season, the shelter saw a total of 51 unique individuals under the age of 18 access its service⁵.

Kiwanis Emergency Youth Shelter (Youth 13 to 18):

“In 2013-2014 fiscal year, a total of 297 youth accessed the KEYS residential component; an increase of 21% over the previous year. Of these youth 173 (58%) were male and 124 (42%) were female. This fiscal year KEYS saw 97 new youth who had never accessed the shelter before.”

Kiwanis Emergency Youth Shelter (KEYS) is a 10-bed facility that provides emergency housing for youth (ages of 13-18) who are in crisis and have no safe housing alternatives. The program offers assistance 24 hours 7 days a week. KEYS is a dorm style residential setting offering up to a 7 night stay depending on the needs of the youth and their family/caregivers. Services include three meals a day, access to showers and laundry facilities, free hygiene products (toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo, razors etc) and clothing (socks, sleepwear, undergarments, seasonal wear, shoes, etc).

KEYS counselors identify the immediate and short term needs of the youth and their families and assist them in accessing the appropriate resources to meet their needs to ensure safe and secure housing after their shelter stay. Counselors respond to a wide range of crisis including, but not limited to, parent/teen conflict, mental health and addiction issues, protection concerns and homelessness.”

*For more information visit the Victoria Youth Empowerment Society website:
<http://www.vyes.ca/programs/>*

⁵ Beacon Out of the Rain Seasonal Youth Shelter provided its monthly usage breakdown. Note: Monthly breakdown is the number of unique individuals per month. This does not total the number of unique individuals over the course of the season (the annual figure), so should not be totaled for data purposes (the annual total should be used). The annual figures were used in this report.

Increase Number of Outreach Workers

“They’re going to want somebody to help them...”

Focus group youth consistently highlighted the importance of having more youth housing outreach workers, particularly to provide intermediate outreach support while youth are waiting for youth supports and services.

FG: “... It’s just because like- I know with like youth health care and stuff like that, like they have huge line ups for things like this. So, I feel like they should have another outreach program that that kids can contact because if they’re waiting to get in, then, there’s nothing they can do in the meantime. So, like, you might as well give them something that they can do. Because otherwise they just feel like they’re being ignored, and then...they just go in the other direction.”

FG: “... I don’t think that the teenagers are using the supports that you’re giving, honestly. Just because of how difficult they are to use, and most like, teenagers, aren’t just going to like look up on themselves all these things. They’re going to want somebody to help them...”

Service providers like youth, identified housing outreach workers as an important factor in helping youth secure housing. Support in advocacy and navigating the various systems youth encounter is needed to move youth through the system instead of having them fall through the cracks. Outreach counseling was also specified as a useful way to connect with youth and offer them support in a fluid and informal manner.

SP: “... I mean part of that support one, is like help with advocacy and navigating the system because it’s difficult for people to do on their own especially if they’ve got a number of other things happening.”

SP: “... because we were finding that that was something many of the youth were on independent living or YAGS, but really just needed some support with navigating the housing system.”

SP: “... more the outreach kind of counseling where you can grab them and just go for coffee or spend some time without, you know, without it having to be a sit down and, you know, a very serious...serious communication about whatever it has to...it has to be a little more fluid and flexible; whether that be taking them grocery shopping or...taking them to meetings; addictions counseling...”

Increase Supply of Emergency Shelters

When youth were asked to share their thoughts about gaps in services, the need for more youth-oriented emergency shelters, and increasing the variety of youth-oriented housing options in general, came up numerous times. Youth focus group participants described how they often don't feel comfortable or safe going to shelters designed for adults.

FG: "Like, you just really need a place where you can actually promise kids a place, because I know many people are just like "Well, if you do this, we'll definitely help you find housing" and it does not help you at all. So...it'd be nice if like...if you were homeless, if you actually had a place that you could go. And like, no sixteen year old really wants to go to a shelter because there are crack heads there, and they're really dangerous people. And they're unsafe, like really unsafe. So they should have a place like that for teenagers."

Many youth focus group participants also shared their frustration with a lack of available spaces in shelters, and policies that limit their stays in emergency shelters.

FG: "I had people that I knew that were staying there, and it was really hard to get into in the first place because they ask you so many questions and...most of the time they don't even have room for you at shelters."

FG: "... And they only let you stay for thirty days. Like I don't think that's much time to figure out, like...what you, like- to figure out- to find a roof to stay under, thirty days is not much time. Or to even like find like a job, and then start working, and then it's like, you have to do so many things..."

FG: "... Not even, like, giving them a time limit. Just like sitting them down before they come into the shelter and just saying like "What's your plan when you're coming in here? Do you plan on getting a job? Do you plan on staying her two months? One month? A week? Three weeks?" and just basically asking them like their timeline, and if they have any plans. And if they don't, help them make plans. Don't just leave them to do it by themselves..."

Service providers highlighted the significant gap in the supply of emergency shelters options for youth as a contributing factor to youth homelessness in the region. Service providers shared their frustration with submitting referrals for youth but still not being able to find suitable housing for them.

SP: "...Even the [outreach team] talks often about how it's hard sometimes to- they can put all those [housing] referrals in place, but...but then to what? If like they kind of recognize that they're not necessarily not going to be able to get much out of it, or it's going to be a long wait for someone. It's going to be a difficult reality."

SP: "...But, the youth shelter, for sure, it's too bad that that isn't something that runs for an entire year. So...because the six months, like,

better than youth staying in- even in like, like...you'll be hard pressed to find youth that will be feeling comfortable to go to like Rock Bay, Our Place if there's like even sometimes like, there's Saint John's that's behind."

The complete absence of emergency shelters and transitional housing in the West Shore and Sooke places these youth in a difficult situation where they may have to choose between housing and remaining in their community. The only option for youth in West Shore communities and Sooke is to relocate to downtown Victoria. Many youth in these communities identified this as a significant barrier as they do not have the transportation to get themselves to Victoria. Furthermore if they do leave their home communities, they often are leaving behind valuable support systems and connections to their local schools.

FG: "Closest thing, probably be like Pandora downtown. And even just getting downtown is sometimes impossible."

FG: "I basically have to choose between having a place to live or staying in school"

Services providers also weighed in with their concern and frustration with the lack of emergency accommodations and shelters for youth in the West Shore and Sooke.

SP: "... I don't want to blanket statement it, but it feels like there's just no shelter for kids who live in Sooke. [...] We just had Hope House open up which is fabulous, but you have to be nineteen ... for Sooke youth, going into Victoria at eleven o'clock at night ... I've only have one kid ever do it. They would rather sleep in the bushes here because, one, if they don't have bus fare, well then that's it; and two, there's a ... contingent of kids here who are very Sooke centered. They don't leave Sooke very often. And so the idea of going into Victoria is terrifying. Much more terrifying than sleeping on the street."

SP: "...So- and I think most people believe in keeping kids in their community, so that for Sooke, is something that comes up over, and over, and over again. So, while there are some amazing programs that they technically can access, it doesn't always work out that way. And again, that being said, there's no shelter in Langford. So...you know, we talk all the time, and the- for whatever reason, the resources in Langford are so bare bones considering the fact that it's growing."

Another issue many youth and service providers face is lengthy waitlists. For the very few housing supports that do exist there are lengthy waitlists. Service providers in the West Shore and Sooke see waitlists for programs as a major barrier for youth. This is highlighted by a service provider's comment below:

SP: "...it's just like so even if there's programs in Langford that Sooke kids could get, the waitlists are even way longer there. So it's like okay that's not going to work either. So....the thing- yeah, most of the programs are based in Victoria, and...so- and again, even they are usually running, you know, with waitlists."

Harm Reduction and Inadequate Housing

Lack of youth-orientated and low-barrier housing

Service providers also shared that a lack of youth-orientated, low-barrier housing with a harm reduction practice reduces options for youth who are using, and/or struggling with mental health concerns.

SP: "... because if they chronically get kicked out of [programs], eventually there are no more options and Victoria has so few options to begin with, that when they hit that 'no options' point, they're just on the street. And then they're transitioning into adult services on the street. And I think that's the biggest too, is that if you can catch it before they're transitioning, because once they hit about eighteen to eighteen and a half, there is a shift in how you provide service. You know, services start to really feel like they're getting to be an adult, they need to be more on their own, and a lot of our kids, cognitively, aren't there yet. And so if they're still homeless at that point and being syphoned into adult services, the likelihood of them being appropriately housed decreases."

SP: "... Substance use, and involvement in that lifestyle plays a huge part [in homelessness]. Because, even if they do get into housing, that will end up eventually setting them up for failure if they're still involved heavily with it."

SP: "... Because I think that's a big part of it too when youth are really heavily judged and ostracized for their substance use, it just ends up pushing them further and further into the margins..."

The need for more low-barrier housing for youth was repeatedly mentioned throughout the interviews with service providers. Finding housing for youth in the Capital Region is already a challenge- a challenge that is exacerbated for youth using substances. Providing more low-barrier options for youth who are using substances to land and stabilize is needed to support these youth in transitioning out of homelessness.

SP: "But transitioning out of homelessness would require, I mean, kind of like what we were saying before. You would need more housing to refer people to, because you can fill out forms for folks and you can try and fast track them, but they're- especially if they're using substances, it's very hard to find buildings that are suitable for youth that are using and that will kind of accept that life choice into their space."

SP: "...when I- and when I speak of youth friendly housing, I speak of very much low barrier housing because that's kind of where I was...for me, I think that that's really kind of the- it really- I think that's the starting point because once you're there, then once you stabilize in that place, then the rest of it you can look at. You can start looking around and seeing what else it is you want from life."

SP: "So housing that allows youth to perhaps have some undiagnosed mental health that hasn't been treated yet, be suffering from addiction,

and those not be barriers to them actually being housed. We have a lot of kids that are in a flux state; a lot of them are too young to be diagnosed at this point, but things are starting to emerge. They may not be quite ready to deal with their addiction, but they still need housing. And most housing requires them to be in enough state that they can participate, that they can follow rules and stuff- which I totally understand. But, in terms of the youth that are chronically homeless, I would say that that is a huge piece ... if you have housing that's willing to stick with them through not being there for a few weeks, through them coming and going, and really working through those challenges, I think that that is a huge piece to determine whether or not they're actually going to be housed. So I think that that's a big piece too, is the age piece of when, when are things happening, when you can catch it."

More youth-orientated detox and treatment services

Service providers identified the need for access to detox and treatment services that have a specific youth focus. Currently, there are few services and few spaces in the region; the 2014 Facility Count counted 11 youth detox beds available in the region.

SP: "...Well there aren't enough spaces. And you know, the big one that I see right now, the big lack of service, is for youth coming out of treatment. There's nothing for youth coming out of treatment ... They work so hard, and they- they, more than anybody, need to be in a place that's supported, and supported by staff. So that they can stay on track and get all the different pieces back in place so that they can feel stable enough to maintain their sobriety, because as soon as things start going sideways, what do you think's going to happen?... Yeah. And so, for me, I- that...on the housing front, I see that as being the largest stumbling block and the complete lack of is tragic."

SP: "...I mean, that's just one way of transitioning youth out of homelessness I think, if that's an option that they want to take. Then that's something we can typically support, but then the only issue with that, is what we see time and time and again is if detox and treatment don't line up, and there's a gap between the time that people are between detox and treatment, then typically what happens is youth will be back outside and they'll start using again because they also don't have like a, typically, like a stable safe home to go to."

SP: "...and there's also difficult- there's some unfortunate aspects to the fact that you're an adult in detox at like nineteen. And so you're kind of mixing with a lot of older people too, and so....it's kind of a concern that if youth detox could go up to twenty-four or something that ...will be a bit more supportive to folks."

Service providers also noted that there is a need for expanding current mental health services and supports for youth. As one service provider stated: "... access to appropriate mental health supports would be really beneficial." The service provider below elaborates on this point:

SP: "...And I do think mental health is a big one. In terms of accessing mental health services is a challenge. Unfortunately a lot of times you have to be really at the end of your rope to go into health services to get involved, and it's because they're so stretched. So we have a lot of kids that are dealing with issues of anxiety and depression that maybe don't fit that model but have mental health that needs to be dealt with. And I do think better access to appropriate mental health supports would be really beneficial. You know, and I- yeah, I think that can be a huge barrier for sure."

Supporting Transitions out of Homelessness

Supporting transitions out of homelessness involves a number of different factors. Central to successful transitions out of homelessness for youth is the availability of appropriate supports and services to ensure youth safely transition into housing stability. Services and supports such as income supports, access to employment programs and life skills programs, transitional housing, health care, alternative education programs, among others can make a huge difference in a youth's ability to stabilize (Gatez, 2014; Karabanow, 2013).

Transitional Housing for Youth

"You get to feel like you're an adult in your own home, but also you have a great support, from a supervisor, as well."

Many youth focus group participants who had experience living in transitional housing mentioned that they appreciated having the opportunity to live semi-independently but also liked having supervision and/or support available if they needed it.

FG: "You get to feel like you're an adult in your own home, but also you have a great support, from a supervisor, as well. Yeah, so you also feel like independent in a way, but fully supported at the same time."

FG: "It's good to have a landing place where you don't have to worry about where you're going to sleep every night so that you can work on getting to a place where you learn to be more permanently. That's definitely a good step."

FG: "I think it also helps that there's other people, like, like say...[names] in [transition house]. There's other people like learning, like the transition, into like, more independent living. So I think that helps also...supportive. You don't have to feel like the only one who is in the type of situation that you're in. You need to relate with people that are our age too. Or, in the same age group."

On top of having more youth-oriented housing available, service providers also highlighted the need to ensure housing is less restrictive and low-barrier. As much as healthy boundaries are needed in youth housing programs it can be argued that overly rigid and restrictive rules and policies can leave youth feeling isolated and vulnerable to homelessness.

SP: "...And someone who has that is really bad for getting into a guilt spiral, so if they end up screwing up in something like this, it's going to trigger their use pretty quickly, and then it's all going to go down from there. So instead of just "Oh I was late for curfew" or whatever rule it is, the whole thing- some of these programs are so strict and you'll get kicked out and they don't make it past three months."

SP: "...Right, so...you know, and you can't bring your friends over and there's no visitors and there's all of this- policies that are put in place that are supposed to protect them from being evicted but really isolates them in a lot of ways that it's like kind of counter-intuitive to where they come from and how they survive out there."

SP: "...and there's some spaces where you wouldn't want youth involved in like with other adults, where there's a building that [is] okay with people who use substances. So you would want to have some sort of more youth oriented housing facility that was okay with youth who are using. And took the precautions to be able to create like a supportive and safe site."

One service provider went beyond the idea of implementing low barrier housing and also argues that more funding is needed to pay for housing so youth can use their money for other necessities or focus more on education.

SP: "I think it does come down to actually having more low barrier housing and being able to have the funding so youth don't have to pay for it themselves, because currently they do have to pay for all the youth housing themselves, even if it's only three seventy-five a month, that has to come from somewhere."

Consistent with the perspectives of youth, service providers strongly believe that a key factor to addressing youth homelessness is to increase the supply of housing with transitional and follow-up supports. The service providers explain the importance of supports and how this is linked to expectations placed on youth who transition to independent living:

SP: "It's a huge blow to these kids when they get housing, and you're like "Yeah!" and then they're back within a few weeks. Because things have broken down, expectations haven't been met, the whole slew of other things. So I think, you know, identifying housing that is long lasting and having the supports in that housing. To really help them succeed, I think it's a huge piece of it."

SP: "I don't think it's so much necessarily getting- I mean, we need more housing, but it's that maintaining it through trying to figure out how to be your own person and during that stage, right."

SP: "...But I do think that the expectation put on teenage- homeless teenagers to have it together enough to be able to support themselves, have housing, and pay for things is not what we would require most stable teenagers to do. And, these ones are put in a position where they have to have everything- on top of typically having barriers of past trauma, drug addiction, not having family support, and those kind of things, right. So you add all that to the pot, and you say "Okay, well you have to make it work to get out of homelessness" and really, if there was more money so that they wouldn't have to worry about getting a job, they could just go to school or focus on counseling so they could get that stuff sorted out. And I think it would make a huge difference because it is. I mean, most of our kids can't make it work unless there's been that additional support, and even then, so limited."

Transitional support and follow-up care are especially important in light of the developmental needs of youth and young adults.

SP: "...there are so many pieces that need to come into play for, to be honest, most of our youth take years to get out of homelessness. Like they can be housed, and we can think it's all set up, and then all of a sudden something happens or something triggers them and their trauma response comes back and they start that cycle all over again in terms of using, and that kind of thing. It can take years. And, sometimes, it just comes down to the youth and their determination to move past it. Sometimes they finally hit eighteen/nineteen and their brains change too. You know, it's that development. Sometimes you just need to wait it out. And then it'll make sense for them. And then they'll move forward."

SP: "It just depends on the youth and...and someone who understands that they, you know, they're a kid. They'll always some kid, even though they're presenting perhaps as twenty-one, twenty-two, they're still going through a lot of the same things that really young adolescents are going through, because their development has been so...somewhat stunted by having to focus on survival for so long."

Income Support and Employment

For youth to successfully transition to independent living, they require access to income assistance and supports, and access to appropriate employment opportunities. Often, income assistance supports provide an inadequate level of support which means youth are responsible for covering the gap between the income assistance they receive and their cost of living.

Access to income assistance/financial support

Access to financial support or adequate employment was highlighted as a critical piece needed for youth to secure housing. Youth who are trying to maintain housing, employment while pursuing education are particularly challenged and it is recommended by the service providers interviewed for this study that youth are provided with some form of financial support.

SP: "...And you know, again, the ability to maintain an income. I mean you can't maintain housing if you don't have an income. And an income that is enough, to pay for the housing, right, which sometimes is difficult given the rental market rates..."

SP: "...So I think that's getting a job, and being able to keep it and also getting a job that's going to pay enough, and give- and enough hours so they can actually pay a rent. Yeah. It's a little bit of a dual edged sword that way."

Although service providers stated that income assistance was helpful for youth it was also noted that the process of accessing income assistance was found to be too complicated and challenging for some youth:

SP: "...but we do find that getting some kind of financial backing is important so access to income assistance, are on PWD, is usually really important."

SP: "...income is really important. Some kind of income. And of course, you know, sometimes that's income assistance and that's a very long, and frustrating, process for most people who have tried to access- and particularly for youth, because they don't understand the system and they don't understand the paperwork profile."

Offer a range of services for youth that meet their needs, whatever their needs may be

Program policies often have unintended consequences; while there are programs in place to support youth experiencing mental health and addictions challenges, youth who are not facing these issues, but still need support, are frustrated by eligibility criteria they see as a barrier to accessing services. Many youth in the focus groups described that they didn't feel "at-risk" enough or that they didn't have a substance misuse problem. An unfortunate outcome of this is that many youth are unable to access needed services and worse yet, is that *exclusionary eligibility requirements* leave many youth feeling unimportant and forgotten.

Some focus group youth indicated that they started using substances when they began to experience homelessness to cope with the daily stresses they faced. This highlights the importance of prevention and working with youth before they experience homelessness and providing them with supports and services that can help them transition to independent living to prevent the consequences of homelessness (Gaetz, 2014).

Currently many of the supports and services available require youth to have reached a certain threshold of problematic behaviour before they can access services. Many focus group youth felt excluded from services they needed to help them stabilize and since they have to be in a bad enough state to access services, it sends the message to youth that they need to develop a substance use problem before they are deemed worthy enough of help. Youth consistently disclosed that they feel unimportant and forgotten about and that their situation and needs are not valued.

FG: "You're not accepted into those programs. And I mean, I would say that a lot of people like us would take better advantage of those, those kind of...opportunities than these people with the mental health and addictions problems that are just going through a revolving door. Like a lot of people like us are just- we need a starting point. And that opportunity is not really offered to us..."

FG: "I did a CASH referral form, and they told me I wasn't fucked up enough, because I'm not a drug user. And I don't currently have an alcohol addiction. So, they pretty much turned me away homeless, and told me to beat it. And a couple more people that I know, they did the same thing; they're only willing to help people that are drug addicted and people that are older, like, old people. So...yeah, we kind of get left out. Apparently we can deal with the...deal with it, because you know, winter, we have a shelter. Spring, you can just go in the tents in the Beacon [Beacon Hill Park] right?"

FG: "It was kind of difficult for me doing the interviews, because like I felt like I wasn't at risk enough, in a way. So it was kind of difficult. Like, making myself go into interviews."

Summary of Pathways Out of Homelessness

Not unlike the findings of previous local studies, youth and service providers identified that there needs to be an increase and expansion of prevention supports in the region that included centralized information about local services, the need for accessible income supports, and employment training and opportunities, and the opportunity to build healthy relationships in order to support youth before they experience homelessness. Youth and service providers also described how important it is for youth to be able to access emergency shelter services closer to home, particularly in the West Shore and more rural areas for the region. Service providers highlighted the need for more low-barrier, harm reduction informed transitional housing, and increasing youth access to detox and treatment supports. Youth also described that they needed services that met their needs wherever they were at, at whatever level they needed support, in order to successfully transition into housing stability.

What service providers and youth focus group participants described as ways to fill the gaps in terms of prevention, emergency response, and successfully supporting transitions into housing stability were elements of a well-coordinated, place-based continuum of services and supports that meet the needs of youth each step of their path out of homelessness.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research, conducted in the Fall of 2014, confirms earlier research in 2008 on youth homelessness that a significant number of young people in the Capital Region are in vulnerable housing circumstances, experiencing homelessness, or at risk of homelessness. There are gaps in both preventative services and emergency housing options, particularly for youth in the West Shore and more rural areas of the region. The following are some recommended priorities for action.

Three main components of addressing youth homelessness consist of prevention, emergency response, and accommodations & supports. It needs to be recognized that while emergency responses are integral to a continuum of transitional supports for youth on their pathway out of homelessness, there is a need to shift focus and prioritize efforts on prevention and accommodations & supports (Gaetz, 2014).

Prevention

- **Support prevention programs in schools:** Engage school district boards in an initiative to address youth homelessness including the implementation of more life skills training in curriculum, ensure all schools are made aware of all available youth housing services and supports, focus on family reunification, and early identification of youth at-risk of homelessness. Build more links between students, school and the community. For instance, youth can create initiatives as part of their learning goals and requirements.
- **Increase youth access to necessary supports and services:** Increase public awareness about services that are available through the creation a centralized youth homelessness information hub for example, through a mobile-friendly website, and through leadership programs in schools.
- **Work with the provincial government and service providers to ensure youth are not discharged into homelessness:** Work with the Ministry of Children and Family Development, local service providers and funders to create policies, and build long-term supportive programs, that ensure youth are not discharged from institutional care into homelessness.

Emergency Response

- **Ensure youth emergency shelter and crisis services are place-based:**
 - a. Increase the number of housing outreach workers, and youth emergency shelters beds across the region so youth do not have to leave their home communities to access crisis supports.
 - b. Work with Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and local funders to recreate mobile supports (similar to the Y-Van, a mobile outreach unit that was cancelled in 2011) in order to outreach to the most marginalized and vulnerable youth. Consider facilitating partnerships for service delivery of mobile units between organizations such as the Youth Clinic, and AIDS Vancouver Island to ensure low-barrier services are developed based on harm-reduction principles.
- **Increase detox and treatment beds for youth:** Provide more youth-orientated detox and treatment services, and ensure transitions from detox to treatment are coordinated across provincial programs, and community services and supports.
- **Build an emergency youth shelter in the West Shore:** There is an urgent need to respond to the needs of youth experiencing homelessness in the West Shore as highlighted in this study and others (CSPC, 2008; Elliot, 2012). Work with provincial, regional and municipal governments and funders to address the absence of resources in the West Shore and create transitional housing options for youth.

Accommodations and Systems of Support

- **Increase low-barrier housing options:** Work with MCFD and local service providers to create more low-barrier, youth- orientated transitional housing across the region so that youth do not have to leave their home communities to access supports.
- **Secure on-going funding for a youth housing workers to sustain long-term relationships:** Work with local and provincial funders to provide long-term funding to ensure youth housing outreach workers continue to work with youth until they are fully adapted to living independently.
- **Assist youth in building financial stability:** Work with local funders and financial institutions to develop youth income supports such as matched savings programs to build up their financial stability.
- **Develop a regional youth employment development system:** Work with local employers, and employment support programs, to support vulnerable youth and youth with barriers to employment in accessing training and employment opportunities, and maintaining employment once secured.

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